PREMIERE ISSUE

Dan Steffan

SCIENCE FICTION eye

Dedicated to the Memory of Jerry Jacks

CON

TENTS

EYEditorials

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Congradulations. Have a cigar—it's a magazine!

It was a difficult birth, but the editors are doing fine and should be eating solid foods again soon. In the meantime, we're holding this little newborn of ours in our hands and marveling that anything like SF EYE could be produced by two semi-humans like ourselves. Sure, it is two months late, and it hasn't yet realized its full style and personality, but the potential it is displaying has made all the nausea and lower back pain worthwhile.

Like most births, however, we had some surprises. First of all, our little production was a hell of a lot larger than we ever anticipated; I guess that being born with cyberpunkosis was a contributing factor. (Despite early detection, we never thought it would come out so swollen.) When the goo and bits of placenta were washed away we realized that we were going to have to do some corrective surgery.

Though we anticipated a circumcision—I wanted all of my children to know the true meaning of the word "ouch"—we had no idea that we'd have to cut the little beast's Dick off completely. We tried to hold off doing it, but in the end we had no choice. Lou Stathis, the writer/rabbi scheduled to provide "The Deification of Philip K. Dick" as an accompaniment to our piece of Dick failed to show up on time, and we were forced to abandon our plans to publish a Philip K. Dick section in this issue.

We do, however, have on hand a great, unpublished outline for a novel that Phil had planned to write called "Fawn, Look Back." Provided to us by Paul Williams and Phil's estate, this fragment is scheduled to appear in our second issue, due in May. And Rabbi Stathis has promised to be early next time, so our Dick section will be presented in its full length in just a couple of months—and if you're real nice to us, we may even expand it.

Also missing this issue is the promised tribute to the late Jack Gaughan. It has been rescheduled to the second issue due to the increasing poundage of the C-word section in this issue. We hope you aren't too disappointed that these items are missing, but we assure you that with a pair of long pants you'll never know the difference.

Next issue will also show more mature appearance. By then we'll have gotten the Times Roman and Helvetica fonts for the laser printer and, once in place, we'll look just like any copy of *Better Homes & Gardens*, or *Hustler* that you might find in your average dentist's office.

We encourage you to send letters and large cash donations (automobiles will be accepted, but no semi-trucks, please—parking is hard enough as it is) for next issue's letter column. Like many aging fanzine editors, we know the value of a good letter column and hope you'll express your opinions and biases at great length. Write today. Act without thinking.

Oh, and one more thing. The baby has just spoken its first word and I wanted to share it with you . all. "Subscribe," it said. Can you believe it?

Out of the mouths of babes... ●

spb

Throughout the history of science fiction, the noise level has always been high. The SF field monitors itself with a kind of intense scrutiny virtually absent in any other form of literature. This scrutiny has created a paradox that underscores the field's continuing vigor and health. In a genre where it is remarkably easy to get yourself published before you have mastered such basic tools as believable dialogue, scene structure, and even grammar; it is also a genre where publication opens you to immediate, often cruel, feedback. We allow our writers to display their sins, but we don't let them get away with them.

But all of this clamoring critique would drift and fade without a pulpit. The demise of *Science Fiction Review* in the Fall of 1986 left a hole. There are various forums, including such able magazines as *Thrust* and *Fantasy Review*, but there are far more preachers than space permits. Realizing the need, Dan Steffan and myself have emerged from our woodshop with a brand-new pulpit.

We see SF EYE as a place to find extended interviews with some of the field's most volitile personalities, a place to read essays that address the field's problems and successes without descending into nitpicking, jargon-laden academia, a place to find stimulating book reviews that are something more than consumer guides. Graphic wizard Dan Steffan will ensure that EYE will *look* great, but we depend on you to keep the content stimulating.

The SF field has always renewed itself with periodic infusions of new talent, new ways of seeing the metaphoric reflections of reality that SF at its best is uniquely qualified to deal with. There are always generational conflicts, as older writers and readers grow complacent, transforming yesterday's innovations into today's fossils. Inevitably newer writers with different attitudes show up, and there is a period of conten-

tion that hopefully results in older writers rethinking their work, and the newer ones learning more about their craft.

Today, the argument rages around the cyberpunks. Led by the phenomenal popular and critical success of William Gibson, these writers have indelibly imprinted themselves on the modern SF consciousness. A cloud of partial facts, uninformed opinions and empty theorizing on both sides of the conflict has obscured much of the very real creative successes of these people. Part of the reason is the label.

Before the label existed, the core cyberpunks, William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Lew Shiner, Rudy Rucker, et al, were simply a group of talented writers who had found each other and hammered out a mutual vision of a new, muscular SF firmly grounded in the Eighties. Then the word "cyberpunk" was applied, in an unconscious act of semiotic sabotage on the part of the perspicacious Gardner Dozois. Instantly the word narrowed the focus of the discussion. Cyberpunks were suddenly seen as a single creative unit, defending themselves against a growing and often virulent criticism.

But these writers all have talents that reach in a great many directions. Where, in the word "cyberpunk," could be fit Bruce Sterling's historical fantasies, or John Shirley's evocative surrealisms? Each of them would defend what they do as a reflection of their original intent, and they are probably right. But none of these interests fit the public perception of what it is they are doing. A single word can alter perceptions more than entire volumes.

This first issue of EYE is primarily devoted to lengthy interviews that allow the original cyberpunks the room to give their own views on literature, as well as many other aspects of modern culture. We have titled the section "Requiem for Cyberpunk" in the hopes that reading what the writers themselves have to say will in some small way help to defang that word, and allow the readership to accept what these people are trying to say without preconception. Or, at least, to keep

the critical commentary where it ought to be, focused on the literature rather than a fashionable buzzword. We have also given space to John Kessel's eloquent answer to some of the perceived excesses of the cyberpunk movement. Our own opinion lies somewhere between these two arbitrarily created poles.

Future issues will be more various. We intend to find and discuss whatever is worthwhile, regardless of the dubious social or political territory into which we are led.

One of the two Gibson interviews was delivered publicly at the 1986 Disclave in Washington, DC. The interviewer is Tom Maddox, a fine new writer in his own right. The other interviews in this issue (along with the fine John Shirley interview published in the final issue of *Science Fiction Review*) were conducted by Contributing Editor Takayuki Tatsumi. Takayuki is a Japanese citizen and Fullbright scholar who has been studying at Cornell University. He brings to his interviews a refreshing viewpoint, untainted by American cultural blindness and single-minded reductionism. His questions are based on what he has read, rather than an image he has been exposed to. As a demonstration of the controversy the cyberpunks have spawned, Takayuki has provided us with a tape of a cyberpunk panel at the SF Research Association convention in San Diego. The arguments and flying accusations in this panel reflect in microcosm the controversy in the SF field at large.

Takayuki has introduced us to a strong Japanese influence that will show up in future issues. We will be using artwork by Jun Suemi, a young new artist who did the illustration accompanying one of the Gibson interviews, reprinted from *Hayakawa's SF Magazine*. As well, our Japanese business aspects are being handled by another fine illustrator, Mari Kotani.

As I have already begun to do so, this sounds like a fine time to introduce the rest of our staff. Associate Editor Dave Bishoff is no stranger to the SF world. A prolific writer in his own right, Dave was editor of the short-lived *Stardate*, which survived only four issues

as an SF magazine before the plug was pulled, but in that time Dave was instrumental in publishing William Gibson's remarkable "The Winter Market" and John Shirley's powerful "What It Takes to Kill a Man." Two of his choices for future issues that didn't materialize were Tom Disch's "Hard Work" and Dave Garnett's "The Only One," both of which have been picked up by *Interzone*.

Paul King is someone you might not be familiar with, but he is an industrious Boston-based critic with an eye for the absurd. He contributes the wonderfully warped look at one of SF's little-appreciated schlock geniuses, R. Lionel Fanthorpe, here represented by a look at one of Fanthorpe's pseudonyms, Pel Torro.

Columnist Bruce Sterling needs no introduction for anyone with the barest of knowledge of SF. His well-crafted fiction has been a mainstay for years. Bruce's regular column should be a graphic demonstration of the thesis of this issue, that his talents and interests stretch far beyond the boundaries of his public role as a cyberpunk.

Heather Bryden, another *Stardate* orphan, will be using her considerable organizational talents towards keeping us on a businesslike track, and disseminating the word as far and wide as possible.

The lovely and somewhat cybernetic Lynn Steffan (wife of Dan) will be utilizing the awesome power of the computer to keep track of those myriads of you out there who are sending in your subscription checks.

Special note must be made of the presence of Ted White. He needs even less introduction than Bruce, and his decades of incisive, uncompromising editorship and critical commentary are demonstrated in his article in this issue. Ted's article was originally scheduled for *Stardate*, in answer to a boneheaded piece that ran in *Harper's*. We feel that what he has to say about quality fiction is of much more general interest than to simply refute an idiot. It is to be hoped that more words can be pried out of Mr. White, if he isn't too pre-occupied with his impending marriage.●

Dan Steffan
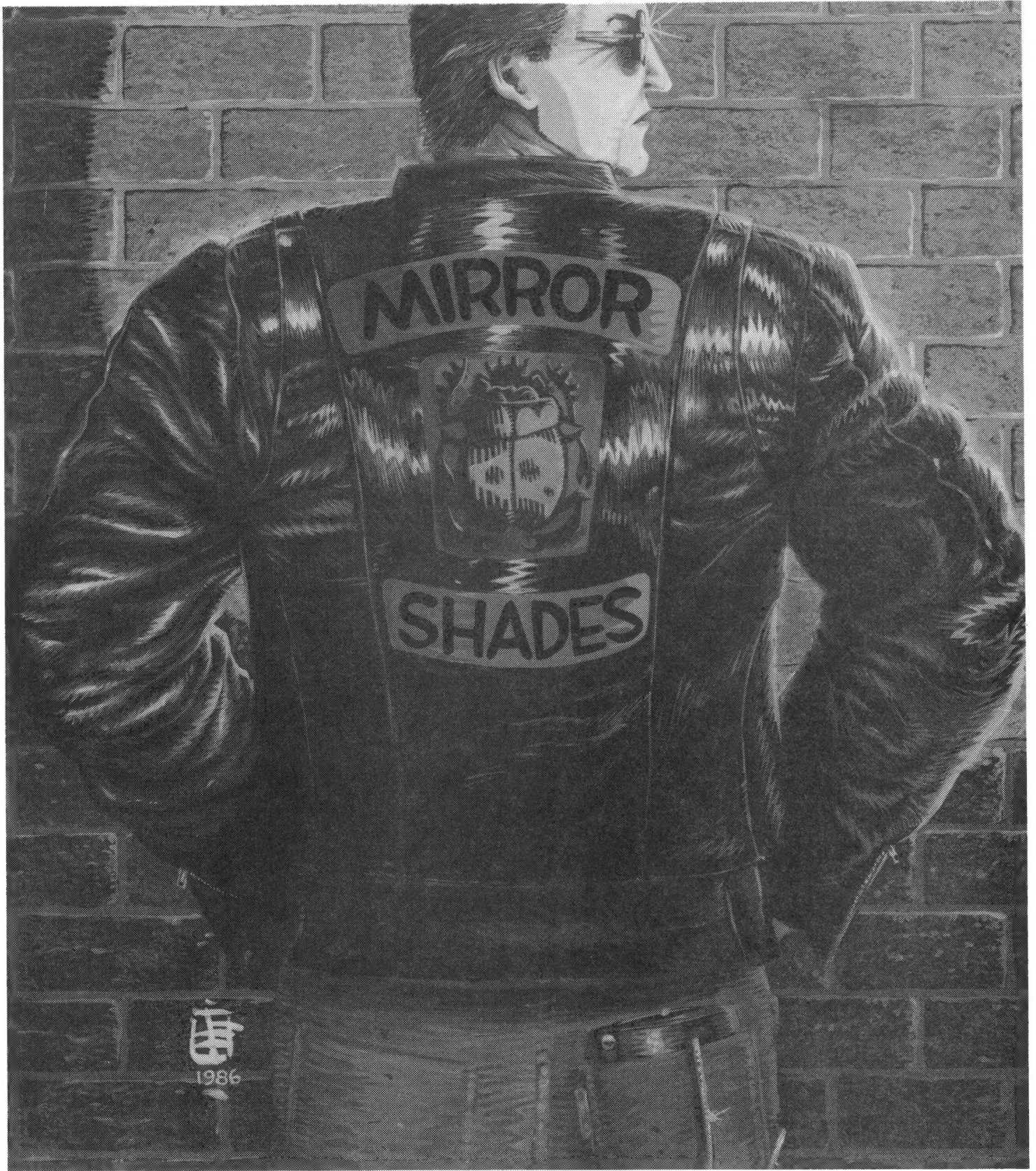
REQUIEM FOR THE
Cyberpunks

In the early Eighties, several talented writers found each other and began exchanging ideas, letters, phone-calls and manuscripts. These people found they shared a common vision of a new kind of purely Eighties SF. They wrote, argued, collaborated and kicked each other up a quantum level into writing fiction they might never have attempted if left to their own devices.

In due course, the fruits of their labor began to appear. Bruce Sterling's Shaper/Mechanist stories and William Gibson's Sprawl stories made an immediate impact.

Then came the deluge. Gibson's *Neuromancer* appeared as part of Terry Carr's resurrected Ace Special series, and quickly overpowered the entire genre. This was followed with Sterling's confusing but brilliant *Schismatrix*, Lew Shiner's finely-honed *Frontera*, and John Shirley's large-scale *Eclipse*.

Science fiction had been lying in a torpid state for the better part of a decade, and these books woke it up. Battle-lines were drawn. The fans of the new group were exhibiting open contempt for the outdated work of the older batch. Arguments flared in the pages of fanzines, in the corridors of conventions, over the phones, and in belligerent chin-to-chin confrontations.

Part of the reason that the readership became so quickly polarized, is that this group of new writers became labelled. Gardner Dozois wrote an essay in the *Washington Post* in which he used the word "cyberpunk." Even though he denies coining the word (stating that "it had been around in the streets for a long time,") by putting it into print, he created a label that instantly caught on. Long after their early period of synergy had ended, the new writers found themselves increasingly constricted by that all-too-specific term.

The meteoric popular success of Gibson dragged the entire group further into the limelight, which only increased the virulence of the movement's critics.

By now, it was several years past the point where the Mirrorshades writers had had their time of intense interaction. They were all beginning to branch out into other forms. But the reductionism of that constrictive label, "cyberpunk," and all its attendant imagery of Mohawked street punks slamming computer jacks into the bases of their skulls, began to haunt them. Editors Dozois at *Asimov's* and Datlow at *Omni* began to complain that their slush piles were filled with cybersludge.

If this pattern sounds familiar, it is. It is the pattern of any artistic movement. The most obvious parallel is the slashing appearance of punk music after years disco doldrums in rock. A small core of committed revolutionaries created a powerful new music that was quickly labelled. Following the label, it was assimilated into the mainstream, and became a magnet for a few excellent artists, and a host of bad imitators. Over the years, the music's edges were softened, its intent blurred, and the original artists allowed to decline and vanish into history.

The original cyberpunk artists are far from declining, in fact, they are cranking up to do their best work. But the original intent and vision is becoming obscured in clouds of hype and imitation.

Here, in the first issue of SF EYE, we present the viewpoints of the movement's creators. Our lengthy interviews with William Gibson and Bruce Sterling present the writers discussing their own feelings about the movement, literature in general and how they see modern culture. As an example of the often-heated arguments, we also present a transcript of one of many cyberpunk panels.

We feel that these interviews comprise a definitive statement about the movement, from the writers' point of view, and a look at the controversy it has raised. Hopefully, this will finally kill that constrictive word, and free these very talented writers.●

eyeTOeye

An Interview With
WILLIAM GIBSON

By Takayuki Tatsumi

Richard Thompson

Tatsumi: I am impressed by seeing you here, in Washington, DC, even though you live in Vancouver. Partly because I have just finished reading your second novel, *Count Zero*, in Chapter 27 of which you describe Turner and Angela taking the subway from Washington to New York City. I think it's a kind of coincidence.

Gibson: No, I lived here. I lived in the Washington area ten years ago. So that bit's written from memory. I lived near Dupont Circle, where they go to get the subway. In a way, that's a vision of a 1969 Washington. It's a Sixties Washington.

Tatsumi: So you are actually very familiar with some of the District.

Gibson: Yeah, but I haven't been here for a long time, so it's a sort of mythical country for me, rather than a real place.

Tatsumi: Why don't you tell me about your feelings toward the place where you grew up?

Gibson: North America has a lot of regional conscious-ness that I think people don't recog-nize. Living where I do, I might as well be living in England or in France. It's very different from this place. This is the place that I remember from my early teens. I think that the place you remember from the early teens is the place that you come to believe in, in some odd sense.

There doesn't seem to be any Cali-fornia in the books I've written. Ex-cept in *Count Zero*, the girl in the first chapter lives somewhere in Cali-fornia, so it's the first time that you realize that there actually is a Cali-fornia. But in my imagination, the West Coast isn't very big. To me it's just a place I dream about, not the place I choose to live.

Tatsumi: Tell me a little bit about your education at the University of British Columbia. Bruce Sterling made the distinction between himself and you by referring to the difference between his major in journalism and your major in english.

Gibson: That's probably a good point. But I hadn't really had a formal education until I was way past the age where most people in North America would be going to college. I went to the university in my mid-twenties, in '74 or '75, as a way to avoid having a job. It was the easiest thing for me to do. I had the leisure to take it seriously, but it left me with a terrible theoretical burden. I think I've read too much criticism.

Tatsumi: So you didn't attend any creative writing programs?

Gibson: No. I did teaching assistant work for film history courses for three years, which is something that really affected me. I never wanted to write for films, but I think it affected the way I saw things. I was forced to look at a lot of old and very good movies.

Tatsumi: So you were much more interested in film studies, than mainstream literature?

Gibson: It was more fun. As notoriety forces me to be more selfconscious about what I'm doing, I'm starting to realize that a lot of my influences are film rather than literary. I'm starting to think that Howard Hawks programmed a whole lot of my first two books, especially in terms of the strong woman who can't really relate to any of the other men in the narrative except for the one guy who might possibly be as strong as she is, but usually it turns out not to be. This thing he was doing with women is fascinating, how he could have done something like that that long ago, and people would have bought it as pop entertainment without

"There's going to be a lot of bogus writing about guys with Mohawks that run computers."

really realizing it.

Tatsumi: In your works we can find a lot of fashionable literary critical terms. For example "The Gernsback Continuum" interprets UFO's and aliens as "semiotic ghosts." In "Winter Market," my favorite short story of yours, has as one of its characters, Rubin, *Gomi no sensei* (Master of Junk.) Some of his constructions, quote: "...seem constructed solely to deconstruct themselves with as much attendant noise as possible."

I'm not asking the extent with which you are familiar with those terms, but I'm only saying that these critical terms sound as fashionable as cyberpunk. It is a fashionableness that seems to characterize your fiction.

Gibson: I think it's a concern for the treachery of the moment, rather than an intent to... there's an American film critic (who's a major influence on my literary style, who's name is Manny Farber) who made a distinction between what he called "termite art," in which a B-movie director sets up a whole lot of things and starts burrowing between them, and the kind of Hollywood art where you take a big slab of substance and try to carve it into some meaning, which I think has been the usual course in science fiction.

I'm definitely of the termite school. I've always liked the little corners of things more than the way the whole thing looks. Looking at the whole ediface of science fiction...I try to avoid that. But sometimes the corners really fascinate me. I've always felt

like exploring the corners.

Tatsumi: The borderlines.

(Noise in the hallway, everyone starts talking at once about non-essentials. Someone mentions band-width, the natural limit imposed on information transmittal that was brought up at an earlier panel. The phrase became a catchphrase of the convention for Gibson and his friends)

Maddox: He was my favorite guy, the band-width guy.

Gibson: It was a valid point. I didn't want to know that. There's a way around that. We can fly to the stars.

It's really academic, because any one of us can access enough information to kill us, right now. So why is this guy worrying about not being able to get enough? What's the level of information sickness?

Did you read the book where the woman fucks the dolphin in the first chapter? I forget the guy's name. Anybody looking at cyberpunk stuff should look at...

Brown: Ted Mooney, *Easy Travel To Other Planets.*

Gibson: Yeah. This was a literary book in the United States that seemed to me to be very much influenced by Phil Dick and Ballard and a lot of other people. But it had a concept in it—it's set in a kind of indeterminate near future—there's something called "information sickness" that's causing a lot of people to go crazy and kill themselves. What a concept. Too much information will give you cancer. I got that the last time I was in England.

Maddox: Information flu.

Tatsumi: We call it kanzume in Japanese, which literally means "can."

Gibson: That would be my fear of

William Gibson is big in Japan

"Johnny Mnemonic" illo from Hayakawa's SF Magazine

going to Japan, the information sickness would seize me up. I'd need a five-day airlock, where I'd be put into a hotel, exposed a little bit at a time.

One of the reasons I've written about Japan, as much as I have, is that Vancouver is a tourist point for Japanese people. It may be easier to get visas and things. So Vancouver is filled with young affluent Japanese people. It's a straight shot on the plane. They get off the plane and sort of absorb it all. There are Japanese restaurants and nightclubs that cater entirely to Japanese tourists. So it's something that I can actually see.

Several Japanese people I've met in Vancouver have said to me: "If I stay here another month, the edge is gone off my game and I won't be able to function when I go home." I think Americans probably say that to Mexicans. I've had a persistent feeling that the Japanese in Vancouver come to a place that's enormous and slow and Anglo-Saxon and mossy. It seems to me like this very fast-moving city, but they come to it and it's like this kind of quiet place, empty place where the space goes on forever. Some of them freak and get on the next plane home. Some of them stay and get into it. But the ones who've always struck me as being the most poignant, are the ones who turn to you and say: "This is really far out, but I can't stay here. I've got to go home, because if I don't go home right now, I'll never be able to plug into what I do."

It's often very sad. They just go, just when they're getting it. Often women jump ship. There're Japanese women in Vancouver who will never go home, and they're probably taking terrible chances by staying. But they just come, and something clicks, and they say: "No way. I'm not going back." And you realize the kind of desperation it must take to do that.

Tatsumi: I know several Japanese women journalists living in Vancouver. They sometimes contribute to Japanese newspapers, but they never go back home.

Gibson: There's a real Japanese expatriate scene in Vancouver. It's very strange. And there's a lot of money, too. The difference in the economy—for me to be living in Vancouver is like Americans going to London. It's a very similar thing. Hard currency, man, yen. This is real money. For North Americans, that's great to see. I really feed on that. It's fascinating.

Tatsumi: What's the name of the book you mentioned?

Brown: *Easy Travel To Other Planets*. Title notwithstanding, it isn't exactly a science fiction novel, it's not about space travel.

Gibson: You're right, it's not about space travel. But it's a fascinating book, because the guy's obviously absorbed Ballard and Dick and a whole lot of other things, and sort of kicked it out. I was also very impressed by the end of the book where he listed all the sources he'd plagiarized. He didn't say, copright this, he said I stole this line from some Aretha Franklin song, he lists all these things. It's probably the best part of the book, in a way. I thought, shit, I should have done that in *Neuromancer*, like Lou Reed wrote this...

Maddox: The intertext.

Gibson: Yeah, the intertext. I'm thinking of writing an intertext for *Neuromancer* for *Foundation*. Ian Watson's after me, do a little annotated bit saying this came from that.

I think the most interesting thing to watch right now would be crossover books. There's a writer named Steve Ericson, who I'm just reading now, who wrote two novels. He's written a book called *Days Between Stations*, and I've got a galley of another book called *Rubicon Beach*. The publisher's blurb on the galley says that this is a cross between Marquez and *Bladerunner*. He's doing the same thing as SF writers, but

> **"I would be very upset if people thought that I had invented the concept of cyberpunk, because I didn't. Labels are death for things like this."**

he doesn't have to bother with the clunky superstructure of science fiction. He's just sort of moved in and is doing it. He'll probably starve to death, because he doesn't have the kind of corrupt support system that we have inside the genre.

I don't find very much pleasure in genre science fiction. The sad truth is that I haven't been able to read it for the last seven years. It's the terrible price one pays. It's either too good, and it makes you nervous, or it's too bad and it makes you ill. I like Paul Scott a lot. Anything that's not science fiction, and is so well written that it makes you forget about science fiction is what I'm looking for.

Maddox: Either that, or it's so well written that the quality of imagination is such that it might as well be science fiction.

Gibson: Yeah, exactly. More and more I realize that the kind of hit of imagination that science fiction people assume is the provenance of science fiction is in fact the provenance of fucking well being able to write. They know this in England. Everybody in England seems to know that. It's really weird, but nobody here knows that. Anything that is sufficiently

well-written will provide the same thrill of disorientation because it's giving you a new experience. But there's not much of that around.

Maddox: That's true about this guy who wrote *Days Between Stations*, Ericson. Because he gives you that kick, every sentence he gives you that kick.

Gibson: It's interesting why that sort of book is not satisfying, because that sort of book doesn't satisfy me totally, it's like watching...oh, God, forget metaphor. Fuck it. Give me a metaphor. It's like watching two dogs on a trestle in Guadalajara. It's a marvelous style. On a stylistic level it's impeccable, there's not a wrong word in it, and he's got the weirdest ideas.

Datlow: Yet, somehow it doesn't work.

Gibson: It's not that somehow it doesn't work. Given what you do, and your obvious skill and professionalism, there's a sort of obligation to a kind of narrative structure that I don't think you're really conscious of. I'm not really conscious of it either, even though I'm trying to do it. When I do something that fails, it's something that doesn't conform to a given structure. That's why I can't read those Stanislaw Lem *Cybernetic Fables*, because somebody told me they were Kuntsmarchen, the art fairy tale, a decadent 19th Century form—these wasted guys sitting around writing fairy tales. It's very precious, but you're supposed to know it's precious, and that's part of the joke. It's beyond me, but I've had people explain it to me, but I just can't do it.

Maddox: I was reading all these interviews with Le Carre, and a review in the *Observer*, Anthony Burgess just reviewed *A Perfect Spy*, and he rants and raves about the success Le Carre's had, and essentially he said: "This man should write a real novel."

Then I started thinking about that and I went back and looked at something Burgess had written before, and what he says is that every good writer wants to get rid of plot, wants to get rid of all this contrivance and coincidence, and I thought, no, what you're saying is that to you is what's a real novel, and people like Le Carre and people who write science fiction have got to have real plot.

Gibson: There's something really true going on. When I first met Sterling, the thing that hooked me on Sterling was that he was sort of staring off into space and saying: "You know, the book I want to write would consist entirely of description. There wouldn't be any verbs." He was dead serious. It was really late at night, and he was telling me what he really wanted to do. He nearly got there with *Schismatrix*.

The only kind of ghetto arrogance I can summon up from being a science fiction writer is, I can do fucking plot. I can feel my links to Dashiel Hammett. If I meet some guy who subsists on teaching writing in colleges, and if there's any kind of hostility, I think, I can do plot. I've still got wheels on my tractor. The great thing is when you're doing the other stuff and you whip the plot into gear, then you know you're driving something really weird. That's the satisfaction of doing this, because you can do both things, and you can ship them off.

Tatsumi: That's what Bruce told me the other day. He is always focusing on idea, while you focus on literary structure. So that might be the difference between you two.

Gibson: The thing that's incredible about Sterling, to me, is that he occasionally, when he's writing, he'll get his back to the wall, and it's as though he knows that part of the thing with science fiction is novelty. There's not too much novelty in science fiction. So he gets his back to the wall and says: "You want a novel

"I grew up taking William Burroughs for granted when I was thirteen years old. I think that Burroughs is the big dividing line."

idea? Here's a novel idea. You want two? You want fucking ten?" And it goes bump-bump for about twenty pages, and you realize the guy's just provided the field with ten years of ideas. It's like watching somebody eat live chickens.

Maddox: Bruce is a monster. He is, he's a sport.

Gibson: Yeah, he's a sport. He can levitate. I've heard him spin things off in running speech, when he's in gear, that if I'd been neglectful in affection, and remembered, I could have lived on. It's like some kind of ectoplasm.

Tatsumi: The next question is related to your topic of *gomi*. I'd like to find in your work some basic dynamics between *gomi* and fashionableness.

Gibson: There's a very fashionable concept in design in the last decade, a sort of retro-design, where you don't try to do something new, you go back and you take something out of its context.

I have a suspicion, from talking with my Japanese friends, that garbage, or that *gomi* is not at all desirable in Japan. Someone once told me that in Japan, the idea of second-hand clothing is really not a good idea. Here it's okay, even fashionable. You can find

consumately dedicated fashion freaks will go and buy dresses, pay cocaine prices for fifty year old dresses.

Datlow: I will.

Gibson: Yeah, she will.

Datlow: But my mother thinks it's disgusting to buy second-hand clothing.

Gibson: A friend of mine went to Japan and came back with suitcases and suitcases filled with exquisite kimonos, just because they were second-hand kimonos. That's a real cultural difference.

So when I use *gomi*, it doesn't have at all the same semiotic connotations, because I think of garbage as being both the element we move in, and being a sort of... To me it's a question of what's the art and what's the garbage.

Tatsumi: There is a difference between rubbish and garbage. *Gomi* has several meanings: rubbish and junk and dirt. In Japan, these are kind of interchangeable relationships, between *gomi* and something really fashionable.

Gibson: Several Japanese people have told me that when they first leave Japan, the thing that strikes them when they're in a world city, it's not that they're in a foreign place, it's not like going to another country so much, as you jump to another part of the Sprawl, you jump to another part of the 21st Century, as opposed to the 20th. It could be Paris, London, New York, you could just be moving through this thing, it's all conterminous.

But if you fall out of it into an area that's not happening, you're back twenty years. That's definitely happening. It's different from the way we look at it, I think it's a great way to look at it. They just think, well we're cool, we're in Tokyo now, we're in New York tomorrow, we can move through this thing, but if we get off the track, we're stuck.

Maddox: Time turns into space. If you're moving around different parts of time, you can get completely lost and fucked up, and all of a sudden you're in 1870. Like if you're in some little town in Alabama, God knows what year it is.

Gibson: Yeah, this is true, this has happened to me. I really believe this at the core of my being that if I get off the track... That's why I never go home to Virginia. That's why I go through all kinds of infinite semantic pain to keep from going to this little town, especially the fear that I'm going to get there and click: '58. In 1958 I couldn't have gotten out of there, I wasn't even there. But something will happen, and I'll be too far off the track.

Maddox: ...my first, my failed masterpiece, that story I wrote, set in West Virginia in 1952.

Gibson: That was brilliant.

Maddox: That's what it's all about, fear of being whopped into 1952.

Gibson: The first thing Tom tried to write had a subplot in it where someone made a mistake. The thing that happened was that he and his wife and child were exiled to West Virginia way back in 1952, and they're just there. They find themselves there and they go out and have to make a living, and it's kind of a nice place, but...

Tatsumi: When I thought of your use of *gomi*, I was reminded of your reference, in *Count Zero*, to silent figures in Dupont Circle who are selling: "battered prosthetic limbs trailing crude nerve-jacks, a dusty glass fishbowl filled with oblong steel dog tags, rubber-banded stacks of faded postcards, cheap Indo trodes still sealed in wholesaler's plastic, mismatched ceramic salt-and-pepper sets, a golf club with a peeling leather grip, Swiss army knives with missing blades, a

THE JAPANESE REFLECTION OF MIRRORSHADES
I: COINCIDENCE
By Takayuki Tatsumi

Bruce Sterling seemed to be teasing me when he concluded his ArmadilloCon introduction of William Gibson with the following remark: "Today, while Tokyo fandom speculates feverishly over his blood-type. we Texans can brag, without fear of contradiction, that we know our Guest of Honor well." (ArmadilloCon 8 Program Book, 1986.)

Indeed, while chatting with Bill after interviewing him at Disclave '86, I happened to ask him about his blood-type, not because of my own curiosity, but because of a postmodern Japanese convention, in which this sort of question is formally exchanged (as part of greetings) between new acquaintances. I expected that his familiarity with Japanese culture had already brought Bill to notice tons of blood-type books being sold in our country as long-term best-sellers, just like Tarot cards, astrology monthlies, or the Bible.

Bill, nevertheless, was deeply astonished, almost shocked, at my question and explanation. This astonished me as well as others. Anyhow, this is how Bruce came to mention Tokyo fandom's interests in Bill's blood-type.

Let me, then, apologize to "Tokyo fandom," my good old village, for representing it by myself (or, more accurately, being forced to represent it), although I do not doubt that in my high-tech hometown people have actually asked the question more often than not: "What is William Gibson's blood-type?" Tokyo

is high-tech, since it is semiotic—otherwise, semio-tech.

We arrive at the starting point, dear Bruce. If Japan is now taken for the sign of high-tech, and, if most of the Japanese people now take for granted blood-type interpretation as semiotic pleasure (remember Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*), why should we not enjoy reading Bill Gibson's blood-type as his "semiotic ghost" (in the Gibsonian term) without having seen him in person, just as Bill himself enjoys the signifiers of the Japanese language—like "Chiba City" or "*Gomi no Sensei*"—as its "semiotic ghost" (remember Roland Barthes' *The Empire of Signs*) without ever having visited Japan itself?

But I do not defend my country's recent tendency, nor compare the Japanese sense of high-tech with the American sense of it. Rather I would like you all to recognize the coincidence just noted between Bill Gibson's reading of the Japanesque and our reading of the Gibsonian. It is difficult to decide if Bill's way of reading has always already been Japanesque, or if our way of reading has always already been Gibsonian. All we can say is that in the very coincidence resides the secret of imagination that has long characterized science fiction: something is going on somewhere, at the same time that a similar thing is going on in other places. And, it is a historical imperative that makes possible such a coincidence. ●

dented tin wastebasket lithographed with the face of a president whose name Turner could almost remember (Carter? Grosvenor?), fuzzy holograms of the Monument..."

Gibson: Yeah, *Count Zero*, well garbage is a recurrant thing. In both *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* and in "Burning Chrome," they keep

returning to the Finn's place.

The Finn's place is the palace of semiotic junk. The whole thing is crumbling skin magazines from dead summers. I enjoyed writing that more than anything, that thing about pure description, I could have gone on forever, I had to hold myself back, even now there's stuff I left out.

If I could change anything in *Neu-*
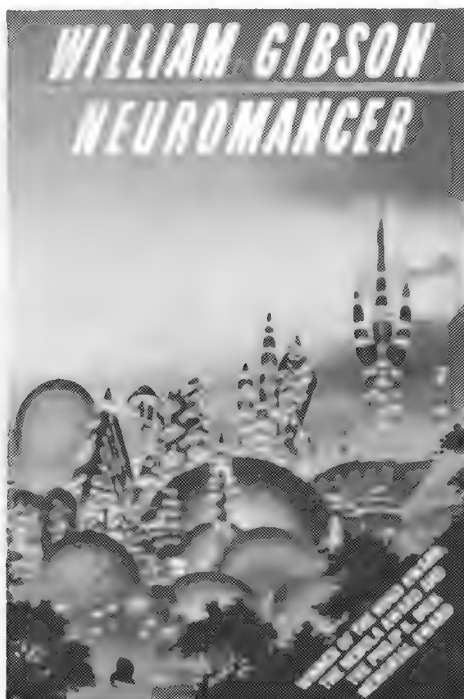
U.K. and Japanese editions of Neuromancer
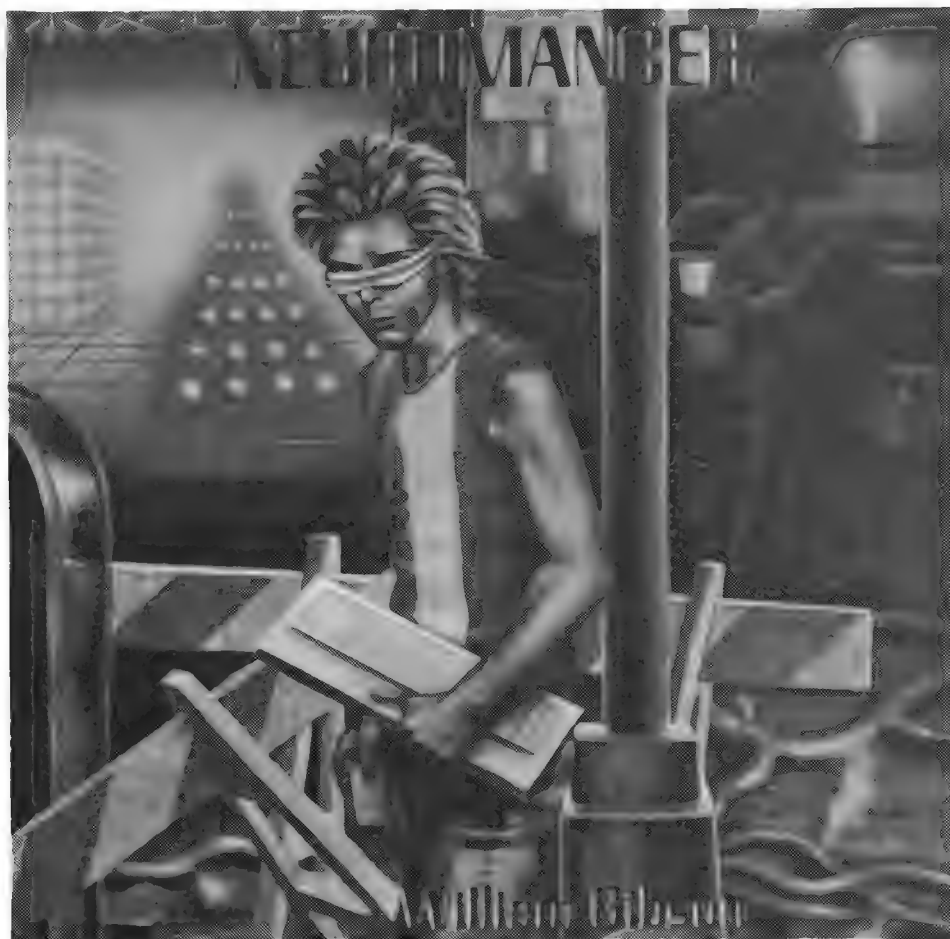
Detail from the cover of Fantasia Press' limited edition of Neuromancer

romancer, it would be the thing where whoever is presenting himself as the Finn, he's in the false Metroholographics environment, and instead of saying: "Ah, you did fucking Stonehenge, and you did this clock. Why can't you guys get it together, and talk to me better and we talk to you better?" But now some people have said: "Ah, but you should have had this and that, the progression of the building of those tools is so brilliant." I would have made that much longer, and probably fucked the book up.

Tatsumi: Are you relating this kind of obsession with something Japanese?

Gibson: No, it's about entropy.

Tatsumi: Like Thomas Pynchon?

Gibson: I think in "Winter Market" the guy says: "All of this shit must have meant something to somebody once, if only for an instant." To me, that's the landscape we live in. Like Cornell. Nobody in science fiction knows who Cornell is, they think he's someone I made up. Cornell believes that being in posession of one of his boxes would change lives. He was as crazy as a sackful of assholes.

Maddox: He had a whole exhibit one time where he put them up so high you couldn't see into them.

Gibson: Boxes. Cornell boxes. It has something to do with fetishism, the sexuality of junk. He was a Lovecraftian figure in the extreme. When he was his approximation of maturity for an infinitely long time, for forty years he never changed. He knew the contents of every junk and second-hand shop in Manhattan. Every single one. He knew everywhere he needed to go to get pieces to make his boxes. It's spooky.

Tatsumi (to Maddox): What kind of construction did you mean when you said post-modern dada in your article on Gibson?

Maddox: I'll tell you the truth. I don't even know what it means. I mean, dada and post-modern, it's a nonsense line. Dada locates you in Switzerland in 1930. There's no dada in Bill, it's all very reasonable. This is the work of a reasonable man. It totally is post-modern, because it's vandalistic. That's what I said in the first part.

Gibson: Yeah, it's vandalistic.

Maddox: He's a junk man, and that's the essence of what post-modern means. The modernists wanted finely-shaped objects, like Eliot in the *Four Quartets*, that's the ultimate shape, a completed musical shape. A post-modern just wants to put a bunch of shit together that expresses the culture.

Gibson: The post-modernists have no object.

Maddox: He sees that the *Quartets* are bullshit.

Tatsumi: Bill is obsessed with the image of fragments, like "Fragments of a Hologram Rose."

Maddox: You see, those people thought that you had to provide a structure that gave a semblance of unity to it all, that's what we do with plot. That's all, the plot's an excuse.

Gibson: I feel that, given the intensely reactionary nature of the genre I work in, I've had to cultivate a kind of hypertrophied plot muscle. I'm not gonna let it get flabby for a while.

Maddox: Bruce is the same.

Gibson: Yeah, he thinks the world is pretty much ready for singing the true song.

One of the only thing's that Heinlein's ever said that I have any respect for, about how to write a short story,

"I feel that, given the intensely reactionary nature of the genre I work in, I've had to cultivate a kind of hypertrophied plot muscle."

is that it's like you're walking down the street and a drunk jumps out of an alley and grabs you by the collar and starts shaking you. That's how you write a short story. It's really true, get the motherfucker.

Stephen King said in a really early interview in an Italian skin magazine when he was still kind of shaken and open by this kind of attention, he said: "You know what I like about writing? You can cut one off from the herd, because you're really alone when you read it." He was quite open about it. He said it was a very sadistic act.

Tatsumi: Your sense of junk is closely related with your obsession with fragments.

Gibson: I can't disassociate from my popular cultural context. I grew up taking William Burroughs for granted when I was thirteen years old. I think that Burroughs is the big dividing line. People either understand or not. Hal Clement would probably not understand a thing of Burroughs.

Burroughs was a guy who, in the course of his delirium, stumbled on science fiction and picked it up the way somebody might pick up a rusty can-opener. He used science fiction as a fragment, as a grotesque and pathetic fragment to cut into his culture.

That's really where I'm coming

from. It makes me go all po'mouthed, when I'm confronted with people who actually belong to the real science fiction culture, who I have a kind of head-patting respect for.

Tatsumi: Your distinction between Tokyo and Chiba might be of interest.

Gibson: That's really dodgy. I don't remember where I got onto Chiba, It was kind of embarrasing, I didn't even know that Chiba existed, so I had to form a fantasy about it as a sort of Detroit. They weren't proud of it. It was just a kind of ugly suburb. So I started using it, because it was a very flash effect to refer specifically to one place, which is a sort of new place in Japan.

When I wrote *Neuromancer*, I was halfway through the book before I got a map of Japan and realized that, thank God, it actually is across some water, so the geography makes a vague bit of sense. But this is important to me. I didn't want some asshole standing up and saying: "Hey, you didn't look at a map, Chiba's on the other side of..."

Japan interests me more and more, but I'm starting to get embarassed about having done this thing without really knowing anything about it. It's just a fantasy. I think in that way it has a weird kind of power. It's like 19th Century Orientalia.

Maddox: It's like Yeats' Byzantium.

Gibson: Yeah, it's not Japan. I particularly wouldn't want Japanese readers to think it's Japan. But it might tell them something about...

Datlow: Strange echoes.

Gibson: Yeah, strange echoes, dreams from the West.

Maddox: Their United States is not our United States. What we're exchanging are weird semiotic messages, like these strange constructs

that we ship over. I'll ship you my weirdass Gibson box if you...

Tatsumi: Professor Tagomi in *The Man in the High Castle* is Japanese, but what is important is that the name Tagomi doesn't exist in Japan. That was only Phil Dick's inspiration. That really sounds like a Japanese name, so that was an important point. But reading Bill's fiction, I couldn't find any weirdness.

Gibson: Well, that's good.

Tatsumi: All the Japanese names are plausible in Bill's fiction. Even though he doesn't know anything about Chiba, the signifier of Chiba sounds very nice to him. Chiba City.

Gibson: You could do some good stuff with signifiers in science fiction, you could get down and signify.

Tatsumi: What is the difference between *Bladerunner* and *Neuromancer*? You rejected the influence of *Bladerunner*.

Gibson: The book was half done before *Bladerunner* came out. When I went to see *Bladerunner*, I panicked and fled from the theater. I still haven't seen the whole thing.

I recently read the original screenplay, which was brilliant, nothing like what they did with the movie, one of the best screenplays I've ever read. Totally fucking gripping when you sit down and read it. It's very very evocative.

In the original screenplay, the opening sequence was that the Harrison Ford character goes up somewhere in Alaska, some remote place. He goes into a mining community and finds a replicant. The guy's got a dog there, and Ford jumps him. He shoots the guy. The dog runs away, and the dog turns out to be a replicant too, because its leg breaks when it's trying to run away, and it's kind of dragging around in a cir-

> # "The kind of hit of imagination that science fiction people assume is the provenance of science fiction is in fact the provenance of fucking well being able to write."

cle. Ford goes over to this guy, reaches into his mouth, pulls a switch and takes the lower jaw out for identification, while the crippled replicant dog runs in circles.

This is the opening scene, and I thought, Holy Christ, brilliant stuff. The rest of it's pretty much the same, just hacked up by the studio. You know at the end where they take you to the country and you live happily ever after? Well the screenplay takes you to the country. But in this final scene, he takes her out in the car, and they're sitting there and they kiss and he hands her the gun and walks away from the car. She shoots herself and it ends with the shot echoing, and the only voiceover that had been written into it is the guy saying: "I don't know, she said she wanted to see some flowers and I want to go back to San Francisco..." and it just sort of fades out. It's heavy. It's really fine stuff.

Hampton Fancher the guy's name was, he can write like a motherfucker. We tried to get him to do the *Neuromancer* script but he ran off to Paris. This guy's something, I'd really like to meet him.

Tatsumi: Did you see *The Terminator*?

Gibson: Yeah, I liked that quite a lot.

Brown: It was a lot better than it had any right to be.

Gibson: No it wasn't. It had a fucking plot. The plot made sense. When d'you last see a science fiction movie with a plot that made sense? It wasn't great, but if you could work at that level, then somebody could continue to up the ante. Every time Arnold would cut his eye out...

Tatsumi: Do you have a specific sense of what the cyberpunk movement is?

Gibson: (groan) Not that word. I would be very upset if people thought that I had invented the concept of cyberpunk, because I didn't. Labels are death for things like this. I think that the fact that these labels exist herald the end of whatever it was. As soon as the label is there, it's gone.

The label cyberpunk existed almost before any of the fiction did. I think it comes from a desperate need on the part of people who've been in this business longer than I have to feel that something is happening. I'm not comfortable with it. It's okay if people want to give me some money for it. I'm very worried about it. I think that less established writers going into this stuff are going to be misled by it. There's going to be a lot of carnage. There's going to be a lot of bogus writing about guys with Mohawks that run computers. Cyberpunk misses the point.

Datlow: I'm getting writers doing that. I'm getting writers who have been writing stuff for a long time, and suddenly they're writing cyberpunk.

Gibson: It's fucking pathetic.

Datlow: It's garbage. There's no point. It's just the trappings.

Gibson: And they don't even understand the trappings. They've got the wrong trappings. That's

why the Ericson book's so fascinating, because I'm sure he doesn't know anything about this, and doesn't care. He hits the same stylistic note, on heavy sustain, too, way more than I've done, where nothing much happens, but it aches with that particular kind of feeling.

Imitations of it are terrible. That's not what I thought was going to happen at all. It's really depressing. Like *Hardwired* (by Walter Jon Williams). That's really depressing. There are parts of it that hit at my syntax that just drive me crazy, and I sort of like that guy. He's a funny guy and a pretty good writer, but...

Tatsumi: So you don't recognize cyberpunk as a movement.

Gibson: Something's going on. Something's starting to happen, but in terms of this kind of encapsulating it, like looking at it from outside our society, it flatters and amazes me that anyone would. It's kind of encouraging that we could attract a little bit of attention, but in terms of what's happening in here, in this society, those labels are... I'd rather be locked in a roomful of rattlesnakes. It's already in my way. I'll never be able to do that stuff again.

Maddox: Maybe that's the real virtue of it, is that it...

Gibson: ...burns you out and forces you to go West. The form needed to be born. One of the things that's personally weird for me about all this, is that I felt that I was doing the obvious thing with a certain minimum of inspiration.

Brown: You put your finger on it earlier in the conversation, when you said that science fiction is such an inherently conservative genre, and when you put something into it that's even mildly unconservative, they read it like a tremendous revelation.

Gibson: Yeah, absolutely. That's something I try to remem-ber. The thing that worries me about the movement is that none of the other stuff in the "movement" is really blowing me away. Okay, it's all cool that people are getting this attention, but I don't feel the heat. I should feel their hot little hands out there in the night, and it seems like a bunch of people spinning their gears.

Maddox: There is no there there. The whole thing is a media ghost.

Gibson: When I answered that questionaire from the Japanese magazine, when they asked me what I thought of this stuff, I said: "Watch out, it's all an illusion." If there was a movement, I would know, I think. Although, God knows, maybe right this minute there's a movement forming somewhere.

Maddox: There is a movement forming. It's not this, and it has nothing to do with this...

Brown: Bruce has been doing his damndest to whip one up.

Gibson: There are bizarre levels of irony inherent in what he's doing.

Maddox: He's like a mad treacherous Rastafarian down there in Texas. This has nothing to do with science fiction, it has to do with Bruce's charismatic leader qualities. Bruce the messiah.

Gibson: Bruce had a concept. It must have been in one of the first letters I got from him years ago, about Lovecraftian pervert-saints, and what the beauties of these people were, and their weird Karma, which he's really into. You know, I think he'd like to be immolated.

Tatsumi: Among your collaborative works, my favorite is "The Belonging Kind" with John Shirley, and "Red Star, Winter Orbit" with Sterling.

AN INFLUX OF COSMIC RAYS WILL INCREASE IN AND AROUND THE ATLANTIC SPRAWL AREAS LATE TODAY AS THE MAGNETIC FIELD DECREASES FOR THE THIRD STRAIGHT DAY. DNA WARNINGS ARE IN EFFECT.
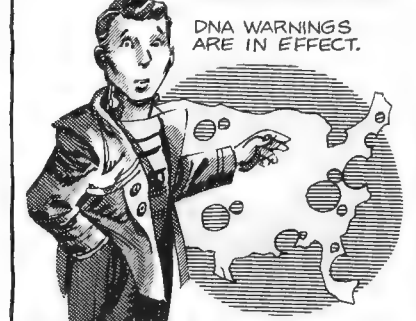
SDI DEF-NET LASER 201, LAUNCHED IN THE EARLY '90S, CONTINUES TO MISFIRE AS EMERGENCY CREWS LABOR IN ORBIT! NEXT SCHEDULED BEAM WILL BE AT 5:30 P.M. AND NORTH DAKOTA IS URGED TO STAY INDOORS.

SUNBELT RESIDENTS CAN EXPECT MORE OF THE SAME TUESDAY AS HERMES NEARS THE 300,000 KILO-METER MARK IN ITS APPROACH TO THE EARTH. FURTHER BREAKUP IS PREDICTED WITH AN 17% CHANCE OF STRIKES IN MIAMI.

THE UNIVERSE *IS* CONTRACTING: HEAT INCREASES DETECTED IN NEARBY GALAXIES CONFIRM THAT RADIATION *IS* FILLING UP THE UNIVERSE **MUCH** MORE RAPIDLY THAN ONE MIGHT EXPECT!

...TROUT SEASON OPENS MONDAY.

THANK YOU, TONY!

Steve Stiles ©1986

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The latter describes the failure of the dream of space exploration, which reminds me of J.G. Ballard's inner space, outer space.

However what interests me most is that which appears in your solo work, but doesn't appear in your collaborative works. That is to say, the obsession with fear, darkness or nothing. Those kinds of motifs seem not to appear in your collaborative works.

Gibson: No, not as much.

Tatsumi: That might be peculiar to your own works.

Gibson: I don't consider the collaborative works to be writing in quite the same way. I think writing is a very solitary activity, and I think the less frightening things tend not to appear in the collaborations, because the collaborations are, even when they may be very black, they're still social activities. The collaborations, for us, are more like games.

Tatsumi: The act of writing by yourself is dominated by the sense of solitude, so you feel fear while writing?

Gibson: Definitely. It's a lonely and frightening proposition. The collaborations are all different. It depends on who you're doing it with. The method of doing it seems to change with each person you collaborate with, but you're still playing a game with someone. I think of writing by myself as looking into the void.

Tatsumi: That kind of fear, of looking into the void, might be considered in terms of existentialism.

Gibson: Yeah, I think so. My sense of the existential is certainly brought out by sitting down at a typewriter, having to write something. I've taken the collaborative jobs seriously, but not seriously in the same way. I don't feel totally respon-

"When I went to see *Bladerunner*, I panicked and fled from the theater."

sible for them. It's a shared responsibility. The other stories I do I feel entirely responsible for.

Tatsumi: How do you see "The Belonging Kind?"

Gibson: To give you an idea how different the processes are, "The Belonging Kind," which I did with John Shirley, was actually the second piece of fiction I worked on, although it wasn't the second one that was published.

He sent me a very very long manuscript, and I thought it was an overly serious, and somewhat absurd piece of work. The initial version that I produced, that became the story, was written as a private joke between John and myself. I sent it to him, rather than writing a piece of criticism. I wrote a certain parody of what he had written. He altered it a little bit and sold it, much to my horror. At the time I was surprised that anyone would buy it. I wasn't even trying to do a collaboration.

With "Red Star, Winter Orbit," Bruce sent me a long version of the story, one that I essentially edited. It was more of an editing job. I shortened it. I rewrote it, but it mostly involved removing segments.

Tatsumi: I think that that story flows in a different direction from the normal mode of cyberpunk writing.

Gibson: Yeah, it's very...

Tatsumi: Consciously parodying cyberpunk?

Gibson: No, because it's easy to forget the chronology of these things. When that story came out, we weren't really thinking in those terms. It's always seemed to me to be a very idealistic story. It's like an L-5 story. Let's get these people into space. There's a consciously Ballardian element to it.

Tatsumi: Rejection of outer space?

Gibson: Well no, because it's going two ways. In the end of the story, when the poor people come to take it over, it's almost like a Heinlein. It's the Heinlein dream. When the colonel is in a sort of delirium, he's watching the films of different space filers. Incidently, that's a story that was immediately dated by the space shuttle blowing up. With the explosion of the space shuttle, the story became impossible, because he's sitting there watching all the space deaths, and that's not there. So you can immediately tell this was written years ago.

Tatsumi: Apart from your collaborations, "Hinterlands" reminds me of Joseph Conrad.

Gibson: Yeah, that is Conradian. I've had plans for a long time to try to write a very consciously Conradian novel, which hasn't pulled out yet.

Tatsumi: I was wondering what you meant by fear, the glandular fear in that story, because in some places it is referred to as a specific drug, but in other places it does not.

Gibson: No, it's not. This is confusing, because in "Red Star, Winter Orbit," what Bruce calls "the fear" is a betacarboline, which is an actual drug, which affects you as total fear, instant fright.

But in "Hinterlands," what he calls "the fear" is a psychological reaction to the condition of the story. It's a

hypothetical one that the characters take for granted, that awareness of the alien culture will induce this. It's not really explained in the story, but I've always assumed that it was something that was genetically inherent in the species.

Tatsumi: Something abstract, rather than concrete.

Gibson: Yeah, something abstract.

Tatsumi: It is interesting that your characters, in some stories, are also used in other stories, like Molly in "Johnny Mnemonic" becomes Molly in *Neuromancer*. As Tom mentioned, this Molly becomes Marly in *Count Zero*.

Gibson: That's Tom's opinion. It's interesting.

Tatsumi: And Bobby in "Burning Chrome" becomes Bobby in *Count Zero*. You also think of these people as fragments, in the sense of "Fragments of a Hologram Rose," in which you say that we are each of us fragments. This principle is true of your character descriptions.

Gibson: The difference between Molly in "Johnny Mnemonic" and Molly in *Neuromancer* is that in "Johnny Mnemonic" she's a walk-on character. When I wrote that, she was a minor character, a plot device to move things around. I later decided I was interested in her, so I worked her into a bigger thing.

A lot of the apparent affect of these things is a side-effect of having to write them. I think I've always tried to make people feel that the parts of these stories that aren't really deliberate, were deliberate, in the way they're written, so it seems like a coherent thing. But for anyone trying to analyze them as literature, it would be easy to fall into the trap of thinking that it's all being determined by the author. In fact, a lot of it's accidental and left in, and the overall structure of the story, I would hope,

makes the reader feel that it's all been done very deliberately. In fact a lot of it's just scattered around, and the way it's been scattered around determines the future bits of the work.

It's not a very tidy process. It's more a matter of, if I do something by accident and decide I like it, I'll go back in a later story and behave as though it had been done very deliberately, which I think adds to a sense of the thing's cohesiveness. But it's really a trick.

A lot of this is conjuring and illusion. It's the illusions of a coherent world. It's one of the traditional skills of American science fiction.

Tatsumi: In the sense of illusion, what interests me most is your characterization of Bruce as a drug broker in *Neuromancer*, and Rudy as an alcoholic jack-of-all-trades.

Gibson: No, no, this is purely accidental. With the Rudy character, I wasn't thinking of Rudy Rucker. There's more than one Rudy around. I was thinking of someone I knew a long time ago. Rucker accused me of it, jokingly: "Now I'm going to have someone really sleazy named Gibson in my next book." But the Bruce...I don't know why I took that. It's a very common name.

Tatsumi: Yeah, but I couldn't think of that as an accident.

Gibson: It might be a Freudian slip. With Turner's brother in *Count Zero*, I was thinking of someone else who's never likely to read the book.

Tatsumi: Bruce is described as a drug broker. In the cyberpunk movement, he is a kind of drug broker, a charismatic figure.

Gibson: Yeah, a charismatic figure, certainly. I caution you into reading too much into the smaller details.

Tatsumi: Returning to the topic of rubbish, when I was reading your description of *gomi*, I was reminded of Sturgeon's Law, according to which 90% of everything is trash. It's an ironical point, about reading too much into the work. We have long been conscious of science fiction as trash or rubbish. To you, is science fiction as such rubbish or not?

Gibson: That's a tough question. Most of the English language criticism I've read in science fiction, or writings on science fiction in the last twenty years has wrestled with that. Is this literature, or a paraliterature?

I think that genre SF in the United States is a marketing category, and there is a marketing category of genre SF that doesn't have too much to do with what's going on in the literature. Something like this Ericson book is not science fiction in terms of the marketing category, but it is science fiction in terms of literature. A lot of the stuff that's published inside the marketing category, in fact, 99% of the stuff that's published within the marketing category of science fiction in America, I just couldn't read. I couldn't be bothered to read. I'm just not interested in it.

On the other hand I think that there are dozens of classic books that come out outside the marketing category. I think the trouble we have with that is the idea of genre, and that people haven't really defined genre. Talk about the problem with defining science fiction, I think the real problem is defining genre in literature.
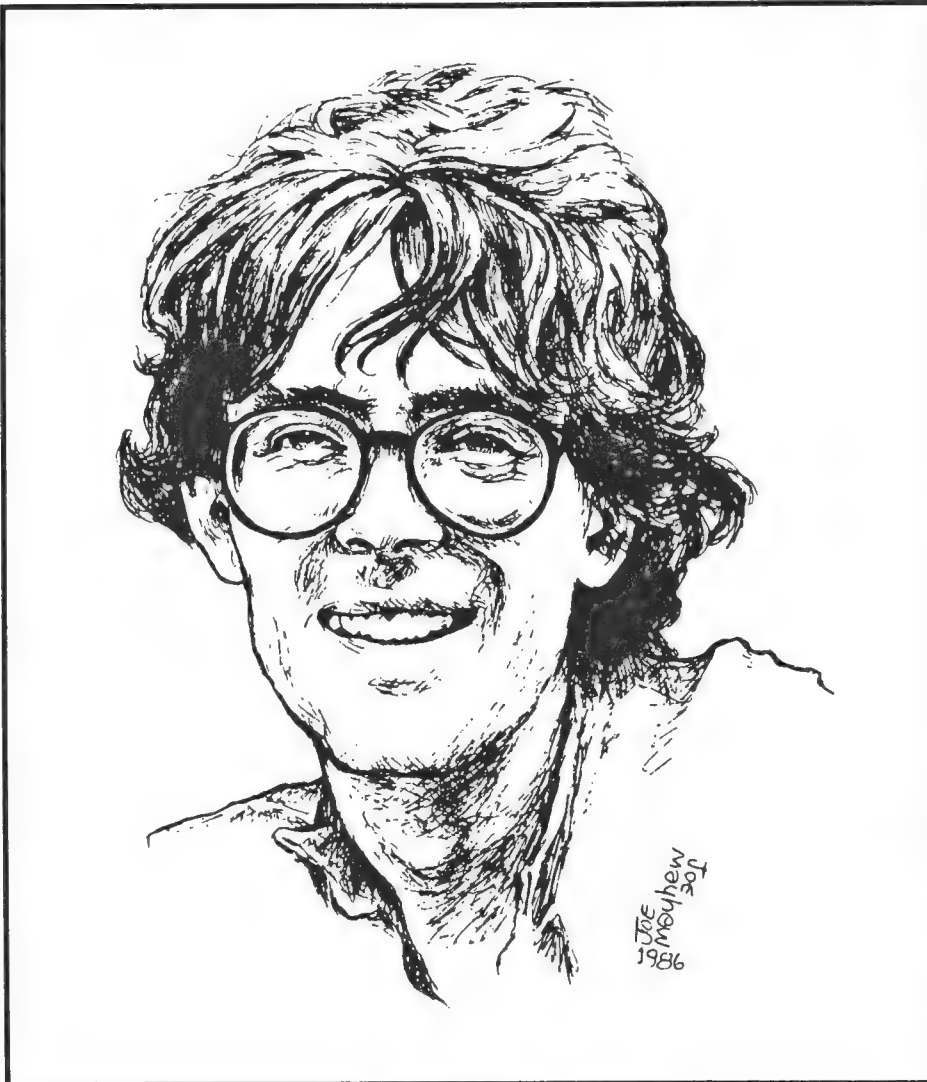
Tatsumi: So your concept is a problem in definition.

Gibson: It's a tough one, and I haven't really worked it out yet.

Tatsumi: Thank you very much for the interview. ●

eyeTOeye

Disclave 1986 Guest of Honor Interview With

WILLIAM GIBSON

By Tom Maddox

Joe Mayhew 1986

Joe Mayhew/DisClave Program Book

MAY 25, 1986

Maddox: Ahhh...Jesus, Mary & Joseph. Where's our Bloody Marys?

(30 seconds of liquids pouring and cubes clinking)

Gibson: I'm just here to answer questions.

Maddox: Okay. This is the Guest-of-Honor interview, which is a totally bogus thing that Gibson dreamed up out of his wretched inability to write a speech, trying to escape the one ineluctable responsibility of a Guest-of-Honor.

This is William Gibson, to my right. He's abused himself horribly, he's in no fit condition to talk to human beings. Aren't you glad you're here? Later on, you'll have a chance to ask him anything that you want, so long as it's sort of degrading. If it's just idle curiosity, keep it to yourself—we're not interested.

Okay, the gentleman here to my right, for those of you who have missed all the hoopla, wrote a few stories for *Omni Magazine*, and published a first novel, an Ace Special called *Neuromancer*.

It was a good year for Ace Specials, they were nominated for awards, some of them even got on the shelves in bookstores. *Neuromancer* won the Philip Dick Award, the Nebula Award, the Hugo Award, the Ditmar, and the Most Likely To Succeed Award.

Bill has been, since then, the subject of a great deal of unwanted attention. He's had people forcing money and sex on him, and drugs, and he's found the whole thing extraordinarily distasteful. Despite this, he's decided to come out of his reclusive shell for a few moments before he goes back in to where he lives. (He actually lives deep inside a mountain in Tennessee. All this stuff about him living in Vancouver is so much disinformation.)

I'll ask him a couple of things, and if I can get him kickstarted here,

he'll probably answer. And then, later on, anything that you want to ask him, feel free to do so.

About your life. You are now formally an expatriate. You've lived in Canada a hell of a long time, born in the South... What about your life, if anything, should anyone know to read you, to understand you? What made you? England made John Le Carre, what made you?

Gibson: How can you do this to me?

Maddox: Treachery.

Gibson: I guess I'm a product of my age, as is my colleague here.

Maddox: What is your age, the Pleistocene?

Gibson: 38.

Maddox: Oh. That kind of age. So you're a product of your age. That means you're going through some sort of twisted middle-aged thing? God knows I am. Okay, you don't like that question. Well, let's stick with things that are sort of mildly unloathing. In *Neuromancer* and in *Ccunt Zero*, and in all the stories like "Johnny Mnemonic" and "Burning Chrome" there is a common set of themes; of loss, guilt, treachery, despair... Why is this, young man?

Gibson: Good question. I don't know. I had this perverse drive, when I started to write science fiction, that forced me, against my will, or against my better judgement, to try to run counter to the way science fiction seemed to be written. Those are all elements that one doesn't ordinarily encounter in science fiction. Not to any extent. I had all these twisted ideas, I was going to write books for grown-ups.

Maddox: Either the lights are getting brighter, or I'm losing it entirely.

"I wanted the reader to question the political existence of the United States. There's no indication in those books that the USA exists anymore."

Gibson: It's your optic nerve going out again. Man, you sure can come up with some generalized questions, especially considering my delicate condition.

Maddox: You want something real specific, then? Okay, wanting to write science fiction for grown-ups, that's something we talked about for a long time. In the *Philadelphia Inquirer* thing, I remember you saying that you didn't want to...

Gibson: Scare the pants off twelve-year-old boys.

Maddox: That sounded like that took a curve that I don't think was intended. Okay, who are you writing for, who's your audience?

Gibson: I'm a little puzzled about who my audience really is. My assumption, when I started doing this stuff, was that I was doing a kind of aesthetic suicide run. I expected all this stuff to really stiff inside the genre. I thought there'd be a sort of cult in France, one day. Like the Jerry Lewis cult. But that nobody else would read it.

It's apparent success continues to baffle me. Especially when I go into a science fiction bookstore, and look at the kind of stuff that's selling. And

now the field is starting to mutate into things like punk elf novels. It's real—

Maddox: Okay, you talked about the books you like to read, let's do the "these are the things that I love" number—with music and art and books. You can just take it where you want.

Gibson: Okay, books. Let's take my favorite...you know my favorite...

Maddox: Yeah, but they don't. You forget, you think we're up in your room.

Gibson: You want me to get into a rambling rant?

Maddox: I'll let you.

Gibson: I think that one of the things that's happening with cyb...well, I won't mention it, I can't stand to hear it anymore, so I won't say it, but this kinda new thing, right?

Maddox: My hidden agenda is that that word won't be used.

Gibson: It's funny. In science fiction, anybody under sixty is a young writer. You're always referred to as a young writer. With all the hype going on around this thing, you'd almost think it's like seventeen year olds coming in off the street, whipping sweat out of their mohawks and sitting down to write some science fiction.

Most of the people doing this stuff are around forty. It's about the mean age. Because we're around forty, we're the first generation that could have had *Naked Lunch* as a thirteen year old science fiction experience. I think that's one of the things that makes the difference. The latest incursion of science fiction writers are people who grew up on a diet that just didn't exist before. You could read Bradbury and William Burroughs by accident for the first time in the same week.
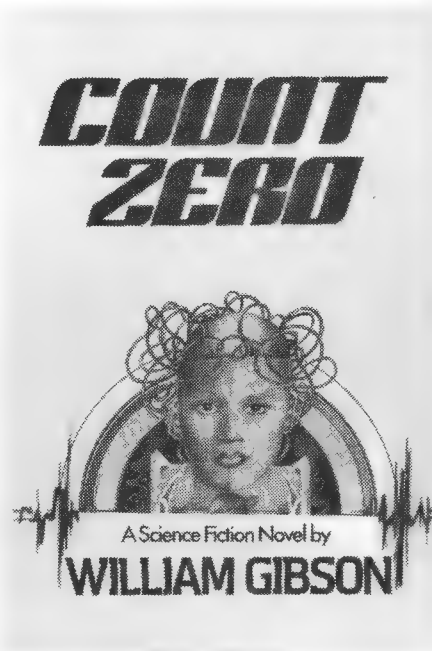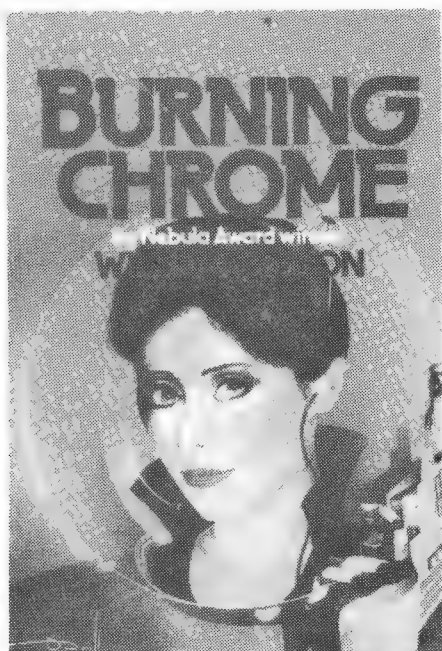
U.S. hardcover editions of Burning Chrome and Count Zero

When I started writing science fiction, I didn't want to do it. I put it off for a long time because I thought it was a kind of a geeky thing to do.

When I started doing it, I actually tried to write stuff that I thought would fit into magazines. I looked at *F&SF* and thought, I should write one of these stories. I'd sit down and try to write something like that, and I never could do it. Finally, out of frustration and bitterness, I started writing the kind of stuff that would get me off. I sort of pursued that. The models I have aren't the same models that someone who came into the field even ten years ago would have.

Maddox: How would they be different?

Gibson: They wouldn't have had Pynchon, they wouldn't have had Burroughs, they have had any of the post-modern stuff... I'm not making sense.

Maddox: Oh yeah, you're making perfect sense. I'm sure of it.

Gibson: You're supposed to feed me lines.

Maddox: I'll try. The literary ancestry...there's Burroughs, there's Pynchon, there's Robert Stone, and John Le Carre, and the whole tradition that those people draw on.

Gibson: It's funny when people start asking you about your literary progenitors. After a while you start clicking on things. Only now am I starting to think back and remember something that really clicked. I've just coming to be aware that Tiptree was a big influence. I don't know whether she'd want to own to it, these days. "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" is a primordial cy––I can't say the word...

Maddox: What about the New Wave stuff?

Gibson: When I had my formative SF experience, around fourteen, I grew up in this little town, and we couldn't get a lot of magazines. The only Ballard I ever saw was in Judith Merrill anthologies. Judith Merrill anthologies were a big influence, because she was the only pipeline I had to that stuff. She would publish really esoteric, memorable things.

Maddox: And also, just for form's sake, for reality's sake (I don't know why it never comes up), Phil Dick?

Gibson: I never got into Phil Dick. Somehow I missed him, coming up. I don't remember reading any of his novels when I was a kid. I may have read some of his short stories. But by the time I realized who he was, what he was, I had already read Pynchon. Pynchon will do for you what Dick does, but it's like free-basing. I never needed Dick.

Maddox: Okay, another way that things may be a little different is that our generation is the first one to grow up with rock'n'roll, fucks that we are. So where does that fit in? You talked about Lou Reed in *Neuromancer*, which I missed.

Gibson: The infinite Lou Reed references...

Maddox: Let me throw this one to you. I really like this one a lot. I got into a vicious drunken argument with somebody who's name I won't mention, because he's famous and vindictive. What the charge was, is what is now the proto-Gibson attack: "Oh yeah, *Neuromancer's* really well written, and so are the stories, but it's all glitz." The notion that it's all surface, all flash. What do you say to that? You've heard this shit, and you're going to hear a lot more of it, because the big anti-Gibson backlash is just cranking up. You can feel the tremors from the goddamn thing.

"One of the reasons, I think, that I use computers in that way is that I got really interested in these obsessive things. I hadn't heard anybody talk about anything with that intensity since the Sixties. It was like listening to people talk about drugs."

Gibson: Yeah, I can feel it moving in. I don't know...what he thinks is "glitz," I think is barely passable prose. That may be part of the problem. I don't understand "glitz." People always say: "the hard glossy surface." It doesn't seem that way to me. I write a lot of stuff about people with emotional problems. That baffles me. When I heard about that exchange, I just thought, this is someone who has a blurb on one of my books, but that was from a couple of years ago.

Maddox: The thing that I said about you in that article I did (in *Fantasy Review*) was that instead of ideas being the hero, which was the old trite phrase about science fiction, the perception is the hero. You give an inventory of perception. When something is happening to one of your characters, you really feel what it's like to be inside their skin, you see what they see, you smell what they smell. In *Neuromancer*, where Case does that wicked drug up in Straylight, you really feel the effect of this drug that doesn't exist.

Gibson: That drug exists. We've all got a little bit of it in us this morning, and there's no way to get it out. If you fall in love, you'll start generating more and more of it. Did you know that? Betaphenethylamine. Minute amounts of it in chocolate, too. There seems to be some clinical evidence that people who have just fallen out of love can cool themselves out a little bit by eating chocolate. It's also tied into the ramp effect. The ramp effect burnout. If I'd known about ramp effect burnout, it would have been all over *Neuromancer*. There's a limit to how much you can get off on an amine. You have to know when to quit.

Maddox: Quit trying.

Gibson: Your only hope is to go over into the endorphin range, at the top of the arc.

Maddox: So this is the kind of insane babble that later on gets turned into the books.

Gibson: You're really privileged to see it here.

Maddox: So when you get this bullshit about "ramp effect" in the next one, you will know what he means.

AUDIENCE: Amplify that.

Gibson: You don't want an explanation, because you'll realize how sloppy my grasp of this concept is. Then, when I want to use it in a book, you won't be able to con yourself into believing I know what I'm talking about, so you won't be able to get real SF pleasure out of the experience.

Maddox: Actually, someone that I am reminded of several times, more strongly than any single science fiction writer, when reading your stuff, is Samuel Delany. There are lots of pages in *Neuromancer* and *Dhalgren*, for instance, that you could kind of flip-flop and catch people by surprise, and they wouldn't even know it was happening.

Gibson: This is flattering. It's a flattering comparison. I don't think it's the same kind of stuff.

Maddox: How is it different?

Gibson: I don't know. You start talking about structure, and it'll be a debacle, more of a debacle.

Dhalgren is a kind of an open form. I think *Neuromancer*'s very much a closed form. *Neuromancer* has more to do with the structure of a Howard Hawks film than it does with *Dhalgren*. It's not an experimental novel.

In *Dhalgren* Delany ran through every post-modern form going. It's a very weird book that way. You can tell he must have out and read something and said: "I'm going to go home and do one of those."

That was a book that hit me really hard. I hadn't read any science fiction for a long time, I think I'd just finished *Gravity's Rainbow*. I went out and saw this book, and I thought, man, I used to love this guy's stuff when I was a kid, and this looks kind of interesting. I took it home, and I didn't leave the house for a couple of days. It was a very strong experience. When my kids are grown, and if they ever come up and say: "What was it like in the Sixties?" I'll say: "Well, subjectively, it was like this."

You see, when I wrote *Neuromancer*, I thought...like when Carr stuck me with that contract, if a minute before the contract fell on me, if someone said: "Well, are you going to write a book?" I'dve said: "No, three or four years

"I'm a collage artist. I'm not into Revell kits."

from now, I'll write a book." He hit me with this thing, and I went home and thought, I don't know how to do this.

So when I look at that book, I see it as a year and a half of pained problem-solving to make it all fit together.

I don't think *Dhalgren* was written that way. *Dhalgren* was Delany wandering around with a notebook, losing manuscripts and things.

I didn't do that. I went home and said: "I'm on the line now." I remember finishing it, wrapping up the manuscript, and thinking I'm going to have to live with this thing for the rest of my life. I'll never be able to show my face. That's true. I really felt like that.

It took about six months before I realized that some people liked it.

Maddox: I think that what I was getting at was probably that I know Delany had that effect on you, you could feel it in every page.

Gibson: I still can't figure out what it is that Delany does, and he still does it. He does it sentence by sentence. But there's something going on there, it's like supercharged semantics. I've read enough modern poetry, even written about it, to have some idea.

There are a lot of techniques available today that aren't in general use in genre science fiction. The weird attempts in the old New Wave, where they come in and try to graft these stylistic techniques onto the body of science fiction, were like trying to graft mosquitos onto wheat plants. That's why a lot of that stuff just didn't work. If I had been around then, I'm sure that I would have been right out there in the front lines with everyone else denying

that I was part of the New Wave.

When I started writing, one thing I thought was that, well you can do that. I remember sending away for L. Sprague De Camp's book on how to write science fiction. I confess I did this. I read every book I could about clarity, and the little Clarion books, I read all that stuff, and I just thought, oh no. It's like sitting around with rows of scaffolds and things, and these guys are saying: "Here's your chisel and your hammer."

Maddox: This is the most disgusting self-revelation I've ever heard.

Gibson: At a certain point, there's an obligation to demystify. I read all that shit. I didn't write anything, I was scared to write anything, but I read it all. I thought that most of it was garbage. It almost stopped me from doing it. Then you look at somebody like Gene Wolfe, his moves on a given page, compared, not just to genre SF, but to most fiction. I look at people like that, and I think, well I could... But I never thought of it as doing that much, I would just put some English on it.

Maddox: One of the things that people talk about—I don't know whether they talk about it behind your back or not, so it's time to get it out into the open—Is that several people who watch the Gibson career progress, is that you can see that whole style getting honed in *Neuromancer*, and *Count Zero* now is the follow-up to the *Neuromancer* world, or what ever kind of bullshit, whatever euphemism...

Gibson: Braided meganovel.

Maddox: Right, salmon-fishing. The question that people pose is: "Where the hell, if anywhere, can it go?" It's like you've built this machine, you've got this gleaming machine that does this one thing, and people wonder what else can it do.

Gibson: Well, I'll tell you. If all the secondary stuff hadn't happened, if nobody had paid any attention to this, I would just be thinking, well, I almost know how to write a book. And that's still actually what I think. That's how I feel about it myself. It's like I almost got this down. The next time I do this, it might actually work. I cling to that. That's the only thing I can do, is to try to write one that works.

Maddox: How about the issue of grown-up fiction? I remember that you said to me at one point, I can't remember in what context, you said something about that maybe it was impossible to write a genuinely grown-up book in the genre of SF. What did you mean?

Gibson: That's something that worries me. I know that when I wrote *Neuromancer*, I was consciously aware of accessing the fucked-up adolescent in me.

When I wrote *Count Zero*, at some point in the book, it started mutating on me, and that's why Turner winds up living in Tennessee with a wife and kid. I was just going to kill him. As you said to me, all you can do with those Robert Stone characters is kill 'em.

How can you do real characterization if people don't have parents and children, you can't do real characterization. You can do SF characterization.

Maddox: Kind of like early Graham Greene characterization, where it's all kind of determinately misty somehow.

Gibson: I don't know which way to go with that, because I kind of dig that early Graham Greene characterization. It's fun to work with.

What I don't like about conversations like this is that the edge is dangerously close to you. It almost sounds as though I'm saying: "I'm going to write a book that is so good that it's not going to be any fun for you." I don't think I really want to do that.

THE JAPANESE REFLECTION OF MIRRORSHADES
By Takayuki Tatsumi

II: *NEUROMANCER* TRANSLATED

The Japanese version of *Neuromancer* finally came out in July 1985; Hisashi Kuroma was its translator. Despite the almost two-year time lag, this novel has been more fortunate than Samuel Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* and *Nova*, both of which are still being translated.

Mr. Kuroma's style would be aptly distinguished by his frequent and adventurous juxtapositions of Chinese and Japanese characters for cyberspatial terms. To put it another way, we are required to read two kinds of representations of one word simultaneously.

Such a technique is employed according to a Japanese typographical convention called "ruby," which enables us to print smaller "kana" (in *Neuromancer's* case, mainly "katakana," which was invented for representing loan words) alongside Chinese characters. The Japanese character functions as a phonogrammic translation of a word, while the Chinese character is ideogrammic.

For instance, "cyberspace," if translated into Chinese characters, is pronounced as "Denno-Kukan," whereas it is actually pronounced as "cyberspace" (saibaa-supesu) if written in Japanese characters. Thus, the "ruby" convention, let me repeat, forces us to read both kinds of characters at the same time.

Kuroma's stylistics underlines the coincidence between the Anglo-American within the Oriental (Japanese characters) and the Oriental within the Anglo-American (Chinese characters), which is consistent with Neuromantic thematics.

Of course, this translation gave rise to great disputes, dividing its audience into extreme camps. Some people criticize such a style, complaining about its "too frequent use of ruby" as well as its "unreadability which might seem fashionable to other readers." Others appreciate it, discovering the linguistic advantage of Japanese and the translator's originality. According to Norio Itoh, the Karel Award winning translator and critic: "If you are under the age of 25, you may easily visualize the world translated in this style."

Therefore, as the original *Neuromancer* induced Gardner Dozois to call its fascinating style "cyberpunk," so the Japanese version gave birth to the controversy about its adventurous style, inciting one of the reviewers to call it "A-Bomb Translation."

The topic of translation style is not the only part of the Japanese reception of *Neuromancer*. As for its narrative structure, nonetheless, Japanese reviewers have given mostly the same comments as Anglo-American. "The first half is exciting, while the latter half gets boring." "This work lacks the conceptual game that has marked science fiction." "Seemingly up-to-date, actually old-fashioned."

One good way to read *Neuromancer* might be as "a novel of the very present" in view of its thematics, simultaneously understanding "cyberpunk" as a movement of the "present progressive" in terms of its stylistics. Moreover, we must wait to see what will happen after the translation of *Schismatrix* next spring, while reading these authors' short stories as they come out in the Japanese *Omni*.

As in America, the future of cyberpunk points to science fiction of the undiscovered "future," (in terms of Sterling), so the future of SF translation lies in translation of the untranslated "future," which will make the sense of coincidence seem unavoidable, as well as uncomfortable. ●

The unabridged versions of the Sterling and Gibson interviews appeared in the July and October issues of *Hayakawa's SFM* in 1986, respectively.

You don't want to get too serious with this stuff. You want to be more serious than the other stuff, but you don't want to be so serious that it's a drag.

Maddox: That it turns into the kind of stuff that you see on page five of the *New York Times Book Review*, the latest in serious contemporary novels.

Gibson: When I look at fiction other than science fiction, the stuff that's supposed to be real hot right now, I often think, well, there's some part of me, some sleazy science fiction part, that says: "Man, I can plot. I can do narrative traction, like these guys don't know." People have kind of abandoned that.

One of the great things about writing science fiction today is that you not only have access to the latest so-called advances in avant garde literature, but you have access to all the stuff that isn't fashionable in the broader field of literature. The thing I love about science fiction is that you can do anything you want. One person can sit down and come up with the most off-the-wall possible moves, and he'd get it published and be paid a pittance for it.

Maddox: This is what's good about it?

Gibson: Sometimes I have this feeling that it's easier to do what you want...I don't know, this is the opposite of everything else we've been saying, but I sometimes feel that it might just be that it's easier to do anything you want to in genre science fiction, than it is outside. That it's easier to get it published.

Maddox: Yeah. I'll go for that. The thing we were talking about the other night where you can get books published that are outside the genre. You can get them published, and maybe even get a nice publisher to do them, and maybe even get nice notices,

but 99.99% of the time, nobody reads the goddamn thngs. Publishers remainder almost every novel they sell. At least, if you're published in genre science fiction, you have an actual readership.

Gibson: That was a big shock to me. At a certain point I said— I think it was to Beth Meacham, who is at Ace, and the editor for *Neuromancer*, I said: "You know what I'd really like to do, Beth, is I'd like to kind of put this stuff behind me and do a mainstream novel." She sat down and explained to me why that was a bad idea, and it just left my head reeling. Basicly it's no promotion, no money, nobody will ever read your book.

Maddox: There's a thing at the end of *The Recognitions*, where this guy who's been working on this symphony for all his life. The first time he plays it—it's in a cathedral in Italy, that an American put this huge pipe organ in that's too large for the structure, and so the first time that this thing's played in there, the cathedral just comes down, destroys it. The last line of the book, I think, is: "The work was often highly spoken of, but seldom played." I think that's that what you could go for, right? Let's do the notoriety thing. You've stepped into that mystifying Andy Warhol media world where everybody's famous for fifteen minutes, and yours are up, buddy, so hit the goddamn road. You've had just a little bit of that carbon arc light turned on you. What's it doing? What's it doing to your head? What's it like?

Gibson: This is the only story I have about all this. Some film producers flew me down to Hollywood. I was going to spend the weekend with them in the Beverly Hills Hotel.

They said: "We'll meet you at LAX." So I got off the plane and I went out to where the cabs were, and there was a white stretch limo with black windows all around it. I sort of looked at it, and thought, well, that can't be

it. There was a uniformed driver who looked like a black belt, mirrored sunglasses, too, standing there. I looked at him, and he looked right through me. So I took a cab with a Mexican cabdriver and listened to Hank Williams, all the way down to the Beverly Hills Hotel.

I get out, carry my pathetic little torn bags into the lobby, go timidly up to the thing and say: "Reservations for Gibson."

The desk man looked at me, a very tanned and handsome young man, and he said: "Buddy, you're not him."

I said: "Bill Gibson. Reservations."

The guy, under his breath, said: "Shit." He turned up this little yellow card, kind of shook his head, signalled to the bellman and said: "Take this guy up to room such and such."

The bellman takes my bags, which he doesn't really want to touch, right, carries them up, opens the door, steps in, and here's this room filled with three hundred dollars worth of alcohol, four hundred dollars worth of flowers, and a bunch fruit that had already started to decay. It's a room about half the size of this room, this gas fire on, and a balcony, and the bellman turned to me and he said: "There's been a mistake. This can't be your room. I'm going to have to call the front desk."

So I said: "Whatever, call them." I was looking around at this stuff, thinking I was going to steal one of these bottles of whiskey while the guy's on the phone.

Then I saw that the central spray of flowers had a little card envelope on it. I went and plucked it off and it said: "The Beverly Hills Hotel welcomes Mel Gibson." But "Mel" had been scratched out, and "Bill" had been written in.

I turned to him, holding this thing up, and I said: "Wait a minute." But there was nobody there. The producers didn't show up to meet me. The guy realized, after I gave him a pathetic ten dollar tip, he said: "Well, you're very lucky, sir, to have all these flowers and bottles of whiskey in your room."

I said: "Well that's nice, but I would like some people." and he said: "Well there are lots of lovely people in the Polo Lounge, why don't you find some and bring them up to your room?"

That's what fame is like.

AUDIENCE: Was the limo for you?

Gibson: Yeah. But, you know, I'm not him.

AUDIENCE: Was this regarding the movie proposal for *Neuromancer*?

Gibson: Someone bought, in a bizarre and unprecedented, ultimately tragic deal, someone just bought *Neuromancer*.

Films are usually optioned. I had a short story, called "Burning Chrome," (which is sort of the prototype, the scale model for *Neuromancer*) which was optioned a couple of years ago.

In an option deal, someone will say something like: "Well, we make a movie of this, we'll give you thirty thousand dollars, but we might not make it, so we'll kind of lease it." And they give you ten per cent each year. That's how people do business.

With *Neuromancer*, somebody just bought it, flat out. Went in and bought the whole package. And now they're in the hole, and I've got the money. I don't know whether the film will ever be made. I don't know whether they can do it. I don't know, films are not my biz.

AUDIENCE: What're the movies you like?

Gibson: *Terminator; Escape From New York; Alphaville; La Jete.* Lots of stuff. *Dark Passage* with Bogart and Bacall.

AUDIENCE: Would you like to see your novel made into a movie?

Gibson: What was that John Le Carre line about seeing your oxen turned into bouillion cubes?

"The weird attempts in the old New Wave, where they come in and try to graft these stylistic techniques onto the body of science fiction, were like trying to graft mosquitos onto wheat plants."

AUDIENCE: Yesterday afternoon, you mentioned how it was sort of beyond you, how you kind of faked the computer science in *Neuromancer*, and your other books, and yet people called you up from MIT and said: "Oh boy, we're naming a whole bunch of stuff after you," and you couldn't understand why.

I've talked to people who work with computers, which I don't, although it doesn't keep me from enjoying your book, but they said: "Yeah, we know there's stuff in here which is pretty farfetched and it's not real, but it's fiction." You've got a kind of thrill that you get, so that it doesn't matter.

I think this is true of a lot of science fiction. It doesn't really matter if you've got all of the nuts and bolts down. The people who work with those nuts and bolts, who are kind of inarticulate, they won't mind if you screw up the nuts and bolts, this guy's speaking for me, he's got some of the fun, the thrill that I get out of science fiction.

Gibson: I'll tell you that I've caught that at science fiction conventions, because that's the only place I've ever come in contact with people who like that. One of the reasons, I think, that I use computers in that way is that I got really interested in these obsessive things. I hadn't heard anybody talk about anything with that intensity since the Sixties. It was like listening to people talk about drugs.

I got that whole thing about virus programs from listening to two ex-WAC programmers who had worked in the Pentagon. They were at a bar at a convention on the West Coast, and one of them said something about virus programs, and I said: "What's that?" and she said, oh well, it's like this, and I said: "I never heard of that, I never heard of that in science fiction, there's nothing like that." and I just took it right home and sort of went with it.

I think what I did was I used the academic stuff that I got fromm studying modern poetry in university to deconstruct hacker-speak, I sort of deconstructed the jargon and built my own reality of computers out of it, and a whole bunch of it seems to have worked. It's something to do with words and meaning. It's kind of mysterious to me, but I can see how it happened. I'll probably never be able to do it again, and if I'd actually known anything about computers, I doubt if I'd been able to do it. I was getting computers through advertising. Not the reality of Apple computers, but the way Apple presents a computer to you, and it's really sexy.

I like the idea of mossy-toothed characters sitting down in basements surrounded by computer gear, being able to be like Bruce Springsteen hot-rod heros in their own minds. There's something to be said for that. Some of those guys are heavy. The guy who programmed his modem to call Falwell's thing, this man deserves the Black Ice award. He programmed his modem to tie up this very very expensive WATS line system, and jammed Falwell's 800 number.

Maddox: He and the guy who broke into, was it HBO? These people, scum that they are, are the ones Bill's writing about. These people who will, no doubt, tear apart the entire fabric of our civilization and leave us all a bunch of naked savages capering on the beach. This is what Bill's after.

AUDIENCE: You were talking before about possible influences on your work, and the very first thing I thought of when I read *Neuromancer* is a novella by Vernor Vinge called "True Names." It's the first thing that I know of that used anything like the same kind of concepts you have of sort of floating through a virtual computer world.

Gibson: I haven't read that, but I'm pretty sure there are notional computer worlds in science fiction. Look at that Tiptree story I mentioned, "The Girl Who Was Plugged In." I didn't arrive at that that way, I arrived at it from watching people watch television. The experience of sensory overload, with the Walkman and the television, you're almost there. There is some kind of weird synchronistic phenomenom that all science fiction writers seem to be aware of. If you get an idea, and you don't use it, somebody will use it.

Maddox: Like ICE.

Gibson: Tom is the inventor of the acronym ICE. He submitted his first story to me for my consideration, and I said: "What are you going to do with this story?" He said: "I don't know." And I said: "I'm going to steal this acronym."

Maddox: Actually that's much too polite. We were sitting in a bar in Portland, and we were sitting there leafing through this and he came to this one page, and it was like, BOING! He said: "I'm going to steal this from you." I knew the story was doomed, so I said: "All right." But I'm the only one who got credit.

AUDIENCE: (garbled question)

Gibson: I wanted the reader to question the political existence of the United States. There's no indication in those books that the USA exists anymore. I deliberately didn't use the word "America." It's not in the books.

When I was in LA, I had to talk to some guys who designed interactive software, sort of one of the spin-off plots for this movie. They were saying: "Well, how do the Turing Police connect it?" and I said: "I don't know." They were just flabbergasted. "You don't know?" I don't work that way. I guess I could say, well, I want you to experience the ambiguity here. But actually I just don't put that stuff together. I'm not a model builder.

Maddox: You're a collage artist, not a model builder.

Gibson: Yeah, I'm a collage artist. I'm not into Revell kits. I never expected to do any more stuff in that particular set. I don't need the Turing Police any more, but I know I'm going to have to put them at some point to provide some kind of logical continuity.

Maddox: I think we've been given the hook here, one more. Anyone got a live one?

AUDIENCE: What sort of scientific and technical background do you do have?

Maddox: I can answer that. He asked Bruce Sterling.

Gibson: True. I asked Bruce, the Sterling clipping service.

Maddox: Do you have a real answer for that?

Gibson: No, actually I don't. You have to jumpstart it at the beginning, but when you get a couple of books out, people come to you and lay things on you, if you're lucky. I have people walking in with things that I can't understand and I have to call Bruce Sterling and say: "Bruce, what does this mean? What's he talking about?" But you sort of get a flow of it, if you get going. It's one of the perks of the job. ●
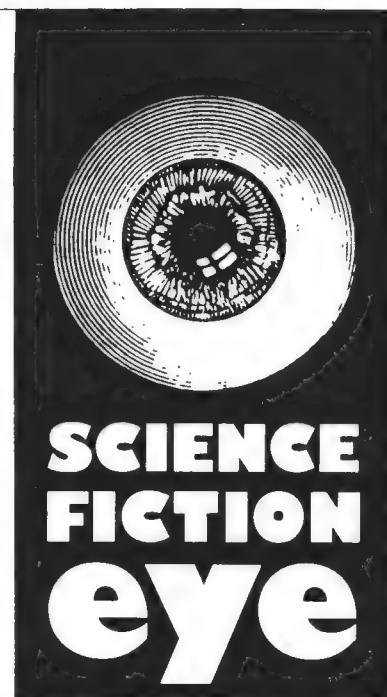
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An Interview With

BRUCE STERLING

By Takayuki Tatsumi

Richard Thompson
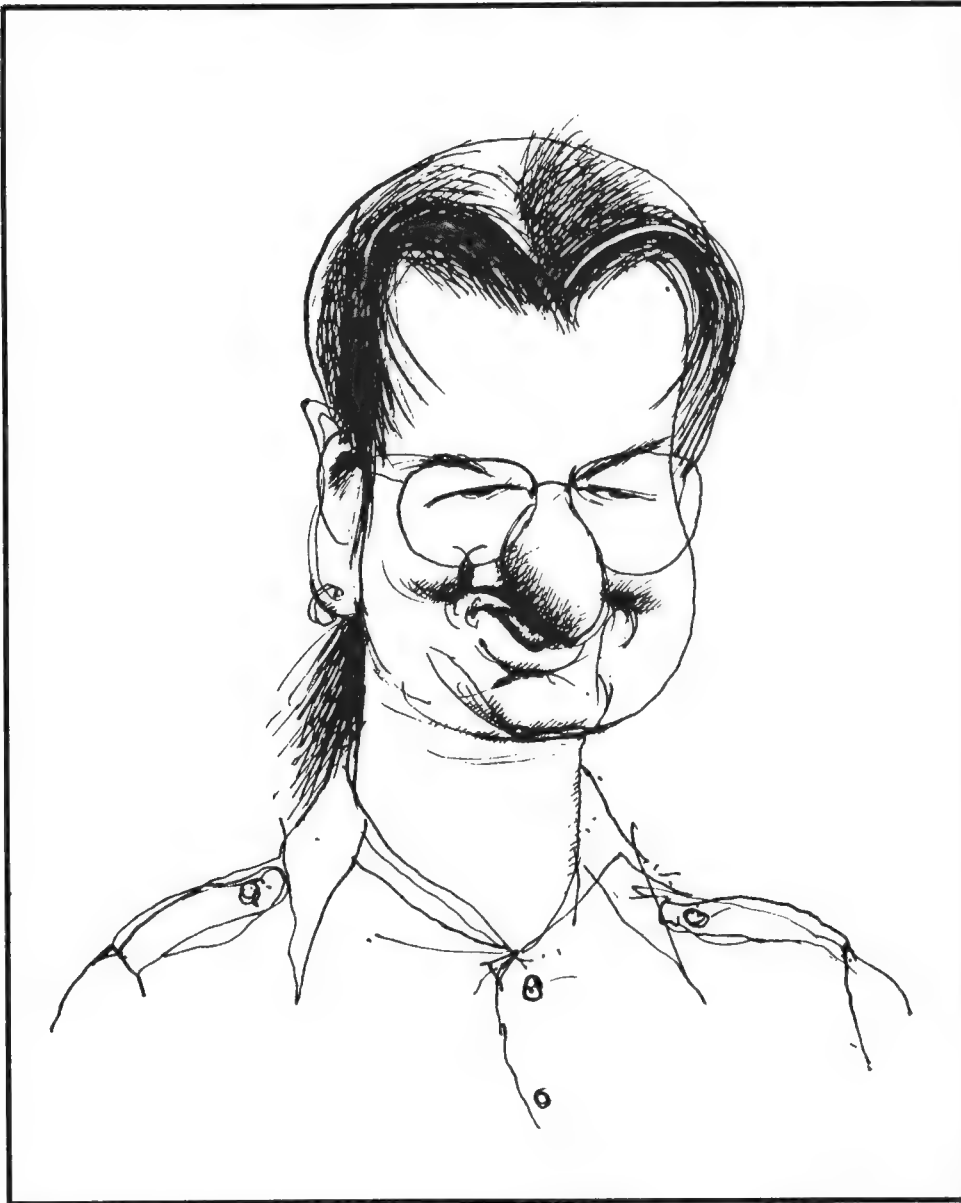
Tatsumi: Let me open this interview by asking you to what extent you appreciate the New Wave movement in the Sixties, in terms of the cyberpunk movement in the Eighties?

Sterling: That's an interesting notion. I think that what cyberpunk represents is an integration of New Wave and Hard SF. As I have said in the introduction to *Burning Chrome*, Gibson's work in particular (which is the quintessential cyberpunk work, really) uses hard SF extrapolative techniques to build a future. But it is his demonstration of them that is pure New Wave. In other words, he doesn't use the typical Heinleinesque techie characters, and take the rest of the social milieu for granted.

One of the things about New Wave that made it exciting, especially the work of Ballard, was the sense of science as being something which had invaded the social fabric. More so than in the hard SF stories, which usually involve some sort of interesting Mr. Wizard type of scientific toy, or McGuffin, but assume that the rest of society is sort of there, as a vast resource to be used.

One of the discoveries of New Wave, and one of the things that's emphasized in cyberpunk, is that social stability and the way things exist within society is a finite resource. It's like clean water or clean air. You can't just continue to import technological innovation into society without having all sorts of bizarre after-effects that spread throughout the whole body of society.

One of the standard cyberpunk images, and one that both Gibson and myself use all the time, is the prosthetic device, which is when technology has actually invaded your body. A character like Automatic Jack in Gibson's *Burning Chrome*, or Abelard Lindsay in *Schismatrix*, who has an artificial arm during much of the story: it's a symbol, in a sense, of the technological milieu--actually getting right under your skin, breaking the boundary between the perso-
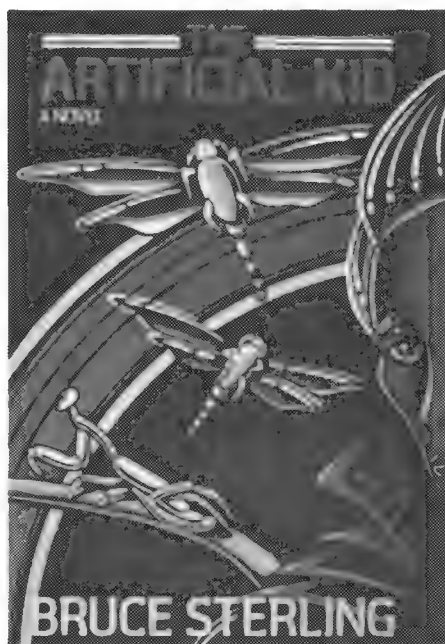
U.S. hardcover editions of The Artificial Kid and Schismatrix

nality and the technological environment.

The New Wave had a rep as being anti-technological, whereas I think that cyberpunks are more dispassionate. They sort of look at it with the air of a lab report without making moral judgements about what's happening.

But certainly if there had been no New Wave, there could not possibly have been a cyberpunk.

Tatsumi: As far as technology is concerned, cyberpunk and New Wave have different standards.

Sterling: I think so, yeah. The thing about New Wave is that it represented a resurgance of mainstream literary value into the naive popular form of science fiction writing, and it brought with it the values held by people who are raised within the humanities, are educated in the humanities, are educated in creative writing classes or in English departments—the values which they hold in their heart of hearts, which are respect for culture and an instinctive distrust of small buzzing nasty machinery and dark Satanic mills. It's C.P. Snow's two cultures all over again.

A lot of the New Wave writers had what most cyberpunks would regard as quite a wimpy, and sort of a wet approach to technology. Whereas cyberpunks pride themselves on their technological literacy and their ability to fit right in with the cutting edges of new technological developments. What they want to do is to grab that technology and use it themselves before someone uses it on them. Whereas the New Wave thing is tied in with the whole Sixties rejection. A utopian, politically radical, anti-technological attitude. "Let's get rid of Babylon and go out on the commune and raise goats."— sort of approach, which most cyberpunks reject with contempt as total wet hippy nonsense.

I think the thing about cyberpunk that makes it interesting is that it's a single word which combines two terms that you have never heard matched be-

Takayuki Tatsumi

fore. "Cyber," the world of superclean, antihuman high-tech...and "Punk," the world of completely rejectionist outlaw attitudes. The thing about "cyberpunk," which makes it an interesting and novel term, is that it represents an integration of two worlds which have traditionally been at opposite ends of the social spectrum.

I feel very comfortable as an outlaw technologist, I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm obsessed with machinery and technology of all sorts, with the sciences, with engineering, with physics, biology, entomology even. That forms a major part of my mental social and cultural milieu. I get *Science* magazine every month, *High technology*...and yet, at the same time, I very much feel that I'm part of the Eighties generation.

I dislike a lot of the attitudes that you find in straight culture. I feel that I have a global point of view and an interest in other cultures besides the great staggering American superpower. These are all quite radical attitudes now.

Although I don't wear safetypins in my cheek, I'm not a '76 type punk—in some sense it's not an unfair judgement on me, especially compared to your average science fiction writer. There's justice in that. I think it's not an artificial combination, I think it's a combination which is native to the 1980's, that no decade before has ever had. I think that's what interests people about it, its novelty. The novelty of people who are both of the underground and of the sciences. Hip techies.

You see it on MTV, for instance, the ultimate source of hip techiedom. It's pop culture and technology, and increasingly the two are combined.

We have something very much in common with the guys who invented the personal computer, the hacker underground. You look at the pictures of them, they're all hippies from California with hair down to here. They show up in ragged jeans and sit there and punch deck. They're a new and very strange social development. A combina-

tion of a person who's gifted in the sciences, and has a really original point of view, and at the same time cares almost nothing for the standard social values that supposedly made this country great.

Tatsumi: I came to know cyberpunk as a movement at NASFIC, last summer. What happened at that panel convinced me that whatever is called a "movement" cannot avoid scandal as well as strategy. There are always certain people who do not like any movement. You and John Shirley both regretted that *Locus* report on NASFIC as a malicious view of that panel.

But to me, those anti-cyberpunk people don't seem to criticise cyberpunk as a genre, but any movement in our field. Why don't you give me a little bit more explanation of that NASFIC panel?

Sterling: When you talk about the cyberpunk movement, you are talking about something which does and doesn't exist at the same time. It exists in certain senses, and in others it is just a sort of convenient fiction or label.

Before that panel, the movement had already been in existence for about three years, but it was completely subterranean. Long before the term cyberpunk existed, the movement existed as a movement. We just considered ourselves Eighties SF writers. We knew that people would label us eventually, because our work was more like one another's than it was like anyone else's.

I'm talking about the core people within cyberpunk, the radically convinced cyberpunk activists, you might call them, people like Rucker, Gibson, Shiner, Shirley and Sterling here. They were there when it happened. We knew that we would eventually end up with our work tagged with some label.

At one point Gibson suggested that we call it "commercial science fiction." So that editors, when referring to our work, would not be able to pigeonhole us and would just have to say, "Oh, I don't want to buy any more of that crazy commercial science fiction." It would be an oxymoron, it would set up some cognitive dissonance within their editorial heads. That never came about, so it's had many names.

Among ourselves we often refer to it as Mirrorshades. Mirrorshades is actually a descriptive term that has to do with a certain kind of fiction that we have all written, but that none of us completely specializes in writing.

Gibson has done dark fantasies, and I've done many historical fantasies, Shiner is working on a political novel now, Shirley is a surrealist, Rucker time, he's by far the wierdest of the lot.

All our work did sort of converge with a sort of hard-edged chrome and matte-black approach to SF, which we called Mirrorshades. It was marked by a fascination with technology and a complete lack of sentimentality, and a disdain for all that is slow and boring.

By the time the panel came around, people were just beginning to hear that the cyberpunks were a movement, and they were alarmed by the notion. It's been quite a while since there has been any sort of organised movement in SF. So the panel was essentially a disaster, which in retrospect was probably inevitable.

But on the other hand, the whole thing was a total storm in a teacup, because it didn't do anyone any harm. All it did was attract a lot of public attention at essentially no cost whatsoever. We lept up—I was mad at the time, I was really upset, I was furious when I walked out on that panel, which

is something that I never do. I wasn't grandstanding, I was really furious.

Later I learned that it was all an unfortunate misunderstanding, and my temper cooled. But at the time my goat was gotten. I was plenty mad. We stormed out of this panel in a fury, and it was a big cause celebre.

But it wasn't over any issue in particular, so it didn't do anyone's reputation any harm. All it was was a sort of venting of steam.

No one was hurt.

Everyone is perfectly amicable now, there are no lasting grudges, no one was punched or knocked down.

That year was marked for violence, with Harlan Ellison punching Charles Platt to the floor at the Nebula banquet. And then there was a brief dustup when Thomas Disch shoved Bill Gibson in a corridor.

No one got hit at that panel. Shirley and I just got real mad and walked out, that was all. Then it was in *Locus* and everybody was saying: "Cyberpunk, cyberpunk, cyberpunk." So we got a reputation as big dangerous rebels without actually having to do anything at all. We didn't hurt anyone, we didn't even annoy anybody. It was all essentially a misunderstanding.

The effect was that it worked out as a kind of neat publicity stunt. But it wasn't a serious problem.

Tatsumi: I thought that you all performed cyberpunk itself, by acting like that.

Sterling: Well, maybe we did. I suppose that was considered a rather punk thing to do, certainly by the very stodgy and middle-class standards of science fiction. It wasn't really, though, it was an act of personal integrity on the parts of Shirley and myself, because we didn't want to be associated with what we saw as clearly a panel out of control, that wasn't going to allow us to have our say. And we weren't going to stay there and allow the things that were being said at that panel to represent the actual core beliefs of what we considered to be our movement.

"We knew that people would label us eventually, because our work was more like one another's than it was like anyone else's."

Tatsumi: So, let's talk about the friendship between cyberpunks. Speaking of William Gibson's first anthology, you mentioned the ease with which he collaborates with other writers. This is completely true of other cyberpunks, especially Rudy Rucker, Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner. What are the merits of cyberpunk collaboration, which characterizes this movement more than anything else?

Sterling: Well, I think it's a natural outgrowth of any sort of determined literary reform movement, which is what cyberpunk is at its base, or the movement wanted to be when it was started. Naturally, if you're going to start discussing what you think is wrong with science fiction, or what you think science fiction could be, or what its potentials ought to be, then it's an easy next step. Once you're together with these writers, who are your peers, it's a natural next step. If you're already criticising peoples' manuscripts, it's an easy thing to go from a suggestion on how to change a particular story, to simply rewriting it. Since we were often shuffling manuscripts and talking literary ideology of one kind or another, this was just a natural consequence of what we were doing.

When you write a story with another writer, it enables you to get within his creative process with an immediacy that's not really possible otherwise.

It's a very common thing in science fiction anyway, Pohl/Kornbluth, De Camp/Pratt, collaborations are endemic in the field. I think the things that led the cyberpunks to collaborate are essentially the same sort of things that led the Futurians to collaborate.

Tatsumi: I think that at that time, science fiction itself was a movement. But these days, cyberpunk might be a movement within a movement.

Sterling: The attitudes have changed. The movement has sort of matured, and it has been about five years since we were first thinking of this. Times change, and I think that the initial explosion is over, and a lot of what we hear now are reverberating echoes, a sort of propagating wave front that has gone away from what was being done in '82 and '83. In some case this is always true for writers, because there is a long lag between anything you write, and when it actually appears. And then there's yet another lag time between when a book appears, and when it actually begins to make its effect.

Neuromancer still seems very new to a lot of people, but to people like myself and Lew Shiner, who read it in manuscript in, I guess, 1983, or 1982, we're very familiar with it. We feel that in some sense we've gone on to other things. But at the same time, you see the emergence of what's almost a second generation of cyberpunks. People who are new, emergent writers who are clearly influenced by Gibson, and in some cases Sterling.

Tatsumi: You mean Walter Jon Williams?

Sterling: Yeah, though he's by no means an emergent writer, he's a very accomplished commercial writer who's had many books published. He's deliberately experimenting with cyberpunk.

You could also say the same for James Patrick Kelly, who's a writer of what's emerged as cyberpunk's alter ego,

the boffo movement. But he's written three cyberpunk stories, one of which I'm putting in my anthology because I consider it a brilliant example of the form.

The influence has begun to spread. You see cyberpunk overtones in the work of John Kessel, for instance—his latest story in *Asimov's*. The latest Kim Stanley Robinson story in *Asimov's* has a pagelong cyberpunk parody in it, which is rather amusing.

Then there are other writers. There are new writers who have been influenced by cyberpunk, like Wayne Wightman, and especially Paul Di Filippo, who has had only two stories so far, but his second story, "Skintwister," which appeared in *F&SF* a couple of months ago is very hard-hitting, very accomplished, very well-written cyberpunk. That's the only thing to call it. The thing is bad news, man, I mean it's a serious piece of work. He's a very ambitious writer, which all the cyberpunks are, and so are all the boffo writers.

Tatsumi: Certainly. John Kessel wrote a letter to me saying that he began writing cyberpunk for a recent issue of *Asimov's*.

Sterling: Well a lot of the boffo writers are experimenting with it, and a lot of the cyberpunk writers are experimenting with stuff which is sort of modern Eighties SF. But it's not categorizable in the same sense. Cyberpunk is almost bound to end up being parodised and reduced to its lowest common denominator. Any success in a popular genre is bound to be copied and copied until it runs out of steam. It's like a pop band. If some fellow appears wearing makeup and braids like Boy George, then four months later you'll see all sorts of idiots who would never have thought of doing anything of the sort before. They will pick up this outward stuff.

You're gonna see that happen. You're gonna see the rapprochement between cyberpunk and the sort of standard pulp schlock, which a lot of people

THE JAPANESE REFLECTION OF MIRRORSHADES
III: NASFIC SHOCK
By Takayuki Tatsumi

To be honest, I had not read *Neuromancer* but only *Schismatrix* when I attended NASFIC '85 and the first cyberpunk panel, which ironically ended in punkish violence. It was also coincidental that I selected that panel above all, totally ignorant of the term "cyberpunk." I merely wanted to see Bruce Sterling on whatever panel.

Sterling is one of my favorite writers. Three of his short stories ("Swarm," "Spider Rose," and "Spook") had at that point been translated into Japanese, all with great popularity.

The knowledge of cyberpunk as a movement introduced me to William Gibson, whose style drove me crazy.

The excitement then ignited by John Shirley reminded me of an old essay (*Hayakawa's SF Magazine*, January 1978), in which the author, Jean Van Troyer,

explicated what happened between John and Harlan Ellison. Something was already going on in the late Seventies, because the Shirley/Ellison controversy told us that John was doomed to be the father of punk SF, or the John the Baptist of cyberpunk, not the youngest son of the New Wave.

Reading *Neuromancer* just after NAS-FIC helped me make sense of all these fragments, and encouraged me to write an article on that panel and the movement in *Hayakawa's SFM* (January 1986), which was immediately followed by Yoshio Kobayashi's detailed overview of cyberpunk writers (*Hayakawa's SFM*, March 1986). Since then, Yoshio and I have promoted cyberpunk in our respective columns in the magazine ("SF Graffiti in the USA" and "Overseas Science Fiction").●

accuse cyberpunk of being. But, of course, it isn't. All of the cyberpunk writers today have been relentlessly intellectual. In the case of Gibson, highly literary as well.

Gibson is a very, very bright human being. He's not some pop writer, he's not a Tin Pan Alley type, not a Grub Street scribbler. The guy's a very gifted creative artist, he would be a standout in any crowd. In SF, he's a sort of an *enfant terrible*. His rise to prominence within the field is of such rapidity that it hasn't really been matched by anyone else. It's without precedent.

Tatsumi: You have a nice friendship with the boffo writers.

Sterling: I know several of the boffo writers quite well. I've known Jim Kelly since 1974. John Kessel and I have met only a few times, but I correspond with him regularly. A couple of years ago, he and I

had an intense letter debate about the nature of boffo and cyberpunk that I think cleared the air and established some of that critical thinking. To a certain extent, the fact that there was a movement in '82 and '83 served to crystallize a lot of stuff that was latent at the time. Boffo, for instance, by its very name is a reaction to cyberpunk.

Tatsumi: You mean boffo was created just after cyberpunk?

Sterling: It was created in response to cyberpunk. It was created by writers, who are also emergent Eighties writers of ambition, who looked at these cyberpunks, who were garnering all these critics' darling type of acclaim, and a certain amount of notoriety. They felt: "Wait a minute. Who are these guys? This isn't the sort of stuff we want to write. Look, this is crazed black leather and chrome stuff, it's totally over the top. What

about human values? What about literary excellence?"—which is where they consider that they shine.

Tatsumi: I think that human values and literary accomplishments might be the products of the New Wave movement.

Sterling: To my personal feelings, I think that the whole boffo group is essentially doing what was being done in the late Seventies, only with a little more daring and in a more elevated tone of voice. I feel that they don't offer anything radical—they're extending the literary wing tradition of SF.

Whereas the cyberpunks represent a break with what had gone on before. The reason they attracted attention before boffo did was because they stood out more. A writer like Kessel could easily be compared to a writer like George Martin or Thomas Disch or Vonda MacIntyre or whoever.

As to cyberpunk ancestry, when you take a cyberpunk story and compare it to the sort of stuff that's being published, it immediately stands out. It's a recognizable tone and a recognizable approach.

If you wanted to look for something in SF that was similar to that, you would have to go back to Ballard or Alfred Bester or William Burroughs, who were all fringe SF figures who were writer's writers. They never really burst right into the center of the field and remade it into their own image, which was definitely what the movement was up to in the early Eighties, and to a certain extent still is.

Tatsumi: Thomas Pynchon was...

Sterling: Yeah, him too, definitely. Pynchon is universally admired by the cyberpunks, and given his personal predilections, he's never really had any personal influence on the movement. But as a science fiction writer, and as a writer who integrates the underground and technology, with his obsession with V-2s,

"All our work did sort of converge with a sort of hard-edged chrome and matte-black approach to SF, which we called Mirror-shades."

he's a very great influence on all the cyberpunks.

Plus the fact that he's a very very gifted writer who is able to use detail very effectively and to set a scene and make it utterly convincing, no matter how apparently bizarre it is. Plus he has that global point of view. A work like *Gravity's Rainbow* has the encyclopedic scope that *Neuromancer* seems to have with its constant jaunting to Tokyo and Constantinople and Denmark. There's a sense of the whole planet there. *Schismatrix* takes much the same approach, except in its case it's an entire solar system. Plus Pynchon's multi-cultural view that he will use—he will have point of view characters who are Blacks from southwest Africa or crazed German rocket engineers or gum-chewing American bobby-soxers. A lot of them have that grotesquerie, that Dickensian edge to them which a lot of cyberpunk characters also have.

Pynchon's a very great influence on cyberpunk, but his influence within science fiction, the pop genre, has been slight or none. It may be there a little bit, but certainly nowhere near as much as in the Mirrorshades writers.

Tatsumi: What do you see are the similarities and differences between you and Gibson?

Sterling: It's clear that we're more like one another than we are anyone else in the field. On some other more basic sense, there really is quite a large gap in our work. We have collaborated together on stories, we have constantly exchanged notes and share our thinking on SF and on interesting elements of pop culture. We're both big devotees of what Ballard calls "invisible literature," which is technical documentation, ads, commercial agitprop, scientific papers, corporate reports and all that sort of subliminal writing that goes on—this is where we draw a lot of our inspiration. And, of course, we're contemporaries.

But there are differences in our work. Gibson is very much more the literary stylist than I am. I have certainly been accused by many writers within the field of being a stylist, and I've even been called precious or pretentious on occasion. Not very often, but by some writers—markedly unprecious or unpretentious ones. Some critics who don't care for that sort of thing have thought that I am considered a stylist. In some sense I am, because I write a rather mannered prose.

I think that we're very much alike because we're both core cyberpunks, and we're both very ambitious writers who have very pronounced and rather similar ideas about what we would like to do to and with SF.

But on the other hand, the movement that we have created is wide enough that if there were many cyberpunk writers, instead of just a few dozen, you would find many people who would fall in the slot between Sterling and Gibson without much difficulty at all, if you consider my writing as the radical hard SF wing, and Gibson's the radical literary wing. Even in that case, that's a hard distinction to make.

Tatsumi: Radical literary wing, sounds like boffo.

Sterling: It's more like boffo, Gibson's definitely not a boffo writer. He's very interested in ideas and the sciences, but essentially

his training in college was literary. He has a degree in English, whereas mine was in journalism. He's much more interested in fiction, per se, and the craft of storytelling than I am. I had the journalist's instinct to go out and get the facts, I wanna know the goddamn facts. When I construct a story, I want to have an idea to gnaw on. And Gibson takes the opposite approach, he has a story in mind and then he wants to sort of accrete it around some particular social thing.

Tatsumi: Do you know what Gibson was doing before making his debut?

Sterling: You mean Gibson's mysterious past? He's always gone out of his way to say very little about his past, even to me. I also have my secretive aspects as well.

Perhaps it's because, as cyberpunk writers, we consider ourselves in some sense pop stars rather than literateurs. We want to guard our privacy. We're both very into pop culture. I love rock music of all sorts, from all countries.

I love pop manifestations of all kinds. *Ukiyo-e*, for instance. One of the reasons I think it's great is that it's a popular art form that is essentially done for semi-literate people, the sort of Tokyo urbanites. The people who were considered the real artists of the *Edo* period were this guys doing *Sumi-e* ink paintings, all high on Zen in some bamboo-clad monastery somewhere. It was guys like Hokusai and Yoshitoshi who were close to the people of the period. They captured that Dickensian pop attitude—that's what I find really fascinating about it.

Rucker is very aware of being a pop writer, Gibson too—he has that classic pop star cool. I also think of myself as being a pop star, rather than a writer with a capital W. That just makes me tired, frankly, I'm not even sure I would want to be a writer with a capital W. If I weren't writing science fiction, I wouldn't write straight novels instead. I think I would probably do pop science, or else get an honest job.

I'm not really interested in writing the Great American Novel. I mean, who cares? I wouldn't read it. It's boring. It bores me. I find them tedious.

Tatsumi: Like Don De Lillo.

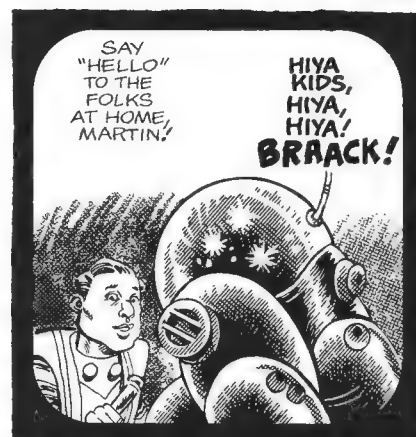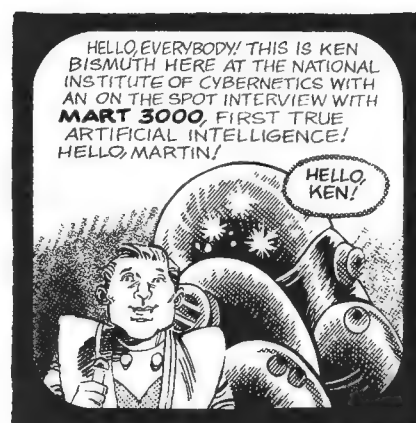**Sterling:** I like Don De Lillo. I think he's great. There's a lot of mainstream writers who are borderline wackos: Don De Lillo I like, John Gardner before his tragic death, Thomas Pynchon.

Tatsumi: John Barth?

Sterling: Barth I can take or leave. His stuff is sort of stuffy. I like *The Sotweed Factor* a lot, but a lot of other Barth's stuff is just too *New York Review Of Books* and metafictiony and oblique. I'd rather do programming than read that stuff. It doesn't rivet my interest. It's too 19th Century. I want more intensity. I want the amps turned up.

The thing about Pynchon that's so great is that he's not a metafictional writer. He's not sitting there writing novels about novelists. He's talking about ideas. He's talking about the things that have impacted the 20th Century, like technological breakthroughs and the whole war machine and the military-industrial complex that is symbolised by Pointsman in *Gravity's Rainbow*, that whole cut-a-dog to bits attitude that he captures so well. You feel, with Pynchon, that you're talking about real issues and something that directly connects with you as a 20th Century person. Whereas, with a lot of the more refined and high literary writers, I just find myself wondering if anyone will bother to read them in another ten years, or fifteen, not to mention twenty.

Then you take some complete trash schlockmeister, like H.P. Lovecraft, whose work was appearing in *Weird Tales* next to truss ads—his work is still in print, and you can read it, and it's obvious that the man was not a gifted writer. As a prose stylist he leaves oceans to be desired. At times he can scarcely construct an English sentence,

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BACK TO YOU, JACK!

SEPERATE CHECKS?

Steve Stiles © 1987

Bruce and Nancy Sterling

French and U.K. editions of Schismatrix

and yet he has gotten hold of something in those stories that immediately rivets a certain kind of reader. You can find something in Lovecraft's world of fantasy that you just can't find anywhere else. And that doesn't mean that he was a good writer. He wasn't a good writer, he was a good something else. He was a good pop star. He had a particular audience in a way that made him irreplacable.

Think of Edgar Rice Burroughs. The guy's work is still in print. He's one of the worst hack schlock writers ever. Yet, you compare his work to a contemporary best-selling novelist of the period, like, say F. Marion Crawford, who was going over gangbusters at the time. Who's heard of F. Marion Crawford now? You'd be lucky if you saw an F. Marion Crawford book in the back of some moldy secondhand bookstore somewhere. F. Marion Crawford must have written forty bestselling novels, and they're all as dead as hammers. And here's Edgar Rice Burroughs, some subliterate failed businessman, and he's churning the stuff out, and he's practically immortal! I mean, every year a new generation of Burroughs fans is born.

Tatsumi: That's tricky.

Sterling: It's real weird, and at the same time, how many Americans, for instance, or how many Japanese, for that matter, know the names of even one *Sumi-e* ink master. But you say the word Hokusai, and people all over the world know who you're talking about: "Oh yeah, the guy who drew those little scribbly characters." It has a wonderful popular vitality. That's what's delightful about it.

Tatsumi: Both you and Gibson have a tendency toward the sublime. Gibson's rather mystic vision is the effect of the cybernetic adventure.

Your transcendental vision looks like the effect of human evolution as human revolution.

As for the last scene of *Schismatrix*—although David Hartwell said the

whole structure of that novel is influenced by Van Vogt—your phrase: "It doesn't matter. Somewhere wonderful," cannot but correspond with the phrase: "Something wonderful will happen," spoken by David Bowman in 2010. How do you relate the Clarkian vision of superhuman with your vision of posthuman?

Sterling: Actually the two things have no relation whatsoever. The book was written and at the publisher's before 2010 came out. When I did see 2010, and saw that that was the last line, I thought "Aw Jeez, I've been scooped by Arthur." It was sort of a shame, because the two don't actually have any relation at all.

As it happens, I am a great admirer of Clarke's. I appreciate that he is a mystic. I suspect that he is a closet Buddhist. I don't think he would have moved to Sri Lanka, which is one of the homes of Buddhism, if he didn't feel some sort of serious spiritual commitment to the Way of Guatama. But I don't know. I've never confronted him personally about his religious beliefs.

I am not a mystic in that sense, although I know enough to get by. I have bruising acquaintence with some mystical doctrines. The thing about the relation of cyberpunk and the transcendental vision, what I call visionary intensity, is something that you see in all the cyberpunk writers. It's essentially the sound of feedback blowing out the speakers: I'll show you God. And that's always been the payoff for the drug culture. Do X and it will put you in this heightened state. That's bound to have had its influence, especially in America. Even since the Fifties, but especially since the late Sixties.

The drug culture is one of the major industries in the United States now, billions and billions of dollars. There are whole countries in South America that are propped up by drug use. Ronald Reagan and his minions at the drug enforcement agencies would wring his hands over this and say, "Oh the pity, the horror, the dirty drug use." And I know that doesn't cut much ice in Japan, where drugs are still essentially

"It's been quite a while since there has been any sort of organized movement in SF."

unheard of. But as a sort of social phenomenom that you can look at objectively, modern drug culture is a fascinating development. Because it is something that's going on in society that has never really happened in any society before. There has never been a society on the face of the planet where a large proportion of the citizenry went around and really altered their states of consciousness. That's bound to have its effect. And it does. You can even see it in the Soviet Union.

It's something that the cyberpunks studied, not because they're all on uncontrollable drug trips, or all drug-soaked maniacs, but because it's something that's important that exists now. I think it's a topic that cyberpunks have discovered, that earlier SF writers have never considered—except Phil Dick, of course. It's something that's there and it's under our nose, but because there are social taboos associated with it, no one had really exploited it, fictionally speaking.

Tatsumi: I think that just after the drug culture, there came the American New Wave, so I don't think that cyberpunk was the direct...

Sterling: Well, it's been around a while now, and certainly a lot of the New Wave people were heavily into drug use and into the whole underground Sixties society. It's hard to single out something like that. It's all sort of one vast seamless pop web. One of the things that makes Gibson's work so effective is the way he can take very disparate elements and weave them together in a way that seems like a

whole thing, that seems like a society, because there's so much different stuff going on. It's easy to tease these things out and analyze them after the fact. It's a cycle. There's all sorts of feedback. It's a system, rather than a dry collection of facts.

Tatsumi: An American system.

Sterling: Yeah.

Tatsumi: A Marxist critic, Frederick Jameson, said that something camp might be very closely related to the concept of the sublime.

Sterling: I'm not very into camp. It's part of an underground. It originated from the American male gay underground, and I don't really know that world very well, so it's not something which has had much of a direct influence on me. I certainly appreciate the ironic and mocking attitude that camp uses.

I suppose you might say that Gibson's "The Gernsback Continuum" is, in some sense, a camp story because it takes old-fashioned SF elements and holds them up to a subtle ridicule by placing them in a position where they've been wrenched out of their context and put someplace else where they're embarrassing.

It was a subversion technique that the situationists supposedly originated. They would take an advertisement, or a comic strip, and delete the words within the balloons, and then put in their own messages that would relate to the comic strip or advertisement in the way it had been seen, but would subtly mock and distort the values. Using commercial semiotics to destroy the interior message that the thing is supposed to convey. It casts doubt on the values by subtly distorting them.

When it comes to this sort of theoretical analysis, you can go on for days. But it doesn't really have that much to do with the actual yin, the mechanics of actually doing fiction. It can be read into it after, but I really think that anything that's successfully

written, is written with the intuitive side of the brain which is operating in a non-analytic way.

Tatsumi: So, you mean that the transcendental thing is a throwback to your mechanics of fiction writing?

Sterling: In a sense it is. But to call it mechanics isn't really right, because that implies that we're in control of what we're doing in a way that we're really not. When we write a transcendant scene, it's because we like transcendance. When we read science fiction, transcendance is a part of it, it's a native part of it. It's like a rock band liking feedback. It's part and parcel of the whole thing.

Tatsumi: Just as Jesus Christ was a superstar, I think that the transcendental scene in cyberpunk might be a new device for pop iconology. Henry Adams once transformed the icon of...

Sterling: The Virgin and the dynamo. You mean we're all worshipping the dynamo? Well, the dynamo is a little worn out these days. The silicon chip I suppose would be where it's at. Or the fiberoptic net, or something. There are technical icons, like the robot, the spaceship and atomic energy, that cyberpunk has replaced with new icons. It's the same hard SF techniques, only they're applied from a new starting point. So, naturally the outcome is going to be radically different. Even if what we're doing is not that much different from the work that a hard science fiction writer might be doing in the 1950's. The fact that we're beginning from the 1980's is bound to lead to a much different and, I hope, more sophisticated approach.

Tatsumi: Your conclusion to *Schismatrix* might be confusing to some people.

Sterling: I think the whole book is probably extremely confu-

"Cyberpunk is almost bound to end up being parodised and reduced to its lowest common denominator."

sing to a lot of people. The thing I really wanted to do with *Schismatrix* is distill the weak beer of conventional space opera into a sort of whiskey. I've heard critics compare *Schismatrix* to hardcore punk, in the sense that it's something really loud and fast, and more intense. It goes a hundred miles an hour. If you put some people in front of a band like Husker Du, they can't hear anything but this thrashing noise, and it immediately puts them off. Whereas others, they hear it, and it's like the Messiah has arrived. I suppose it's a question of taste. *Schismatrix* is a definitive cyberpunk book, probably the most cyberpunk book I will ever write. It's, in some sense, a literary experiment.

Tatsumi: I thought that you knew very well about that kind of literary tradition, of fusing...of setting up a double character... I mean, your protagonist, Lindsay, has a double role as confidence man and an artist.

Sterling: Yeah, he's a confidence man, definitely a con man, no doubt about that. He's got multiple personalities. He has what's necessary to survive in the Schismatrix, or in any society where the pace of change has become impossibly quick. He has the ability to shed this, cultural burden that's laid on you by one environment, and to take up another one without going insane. That's a skill we all have to learn in any time that's extremely turbulent. That's why he's a

success within his environment. He has the adaptation that is necessary to survive. He seems hopeless, at first, but eventually his gift wins him out. There are other people within the book who are much brighter than he is. But when a collapse comes, they become frantic and learn despair and they loose control, and they collapse with the collapse of the system. Whereas Lindsay just smiles in an oily way and looks around for a new possibility and picks it up.

Tatsumi: I think he might be schizophrenic.

Sterling: Yeah. He's not fully human, in the sense that you and I are. Obviously he's got a posthuman kind of consciousness, just as Kitsune does, in a more radical form, which is why they get along well. They both know they're damaged, and that they're not like normal people.
   "Spider Rose," which is an early Shaper story, is a deliberate exploration of the stream of consciousness of someone who's neither sane nor insane, just not thinking or operating by human standards. I find that an interesting notion, and a challenge as a writer or an extrapolator, to try to imagine how it would be to think, if you weren't a human being. How does an artificial intelligence go about thinking about a problem? Gibson certainly is interested in that, with Wintermute, the artificial intelligence. It's tied in with the drug culture thing, how do you think under the influence of a hallucinogen? It's a laboratory interest in altered states of consciousness.
   It's only recently that people have learned how to produce altered states of consciousness, in some sense it's a genuine technical breakthrough, in the same sense that being able to fly is a technical breakthrough.

Tatsumi: So, it's not religious, but technical.

Sterling: You're getting into some peculiar territory here.

If you put an electrode on some guy's head, and he says he sees God, has he had a religious experience, or hasn't he? If someone has a mystical experience under the influence of LSD, have they actually had a mystical experience, or have they just had certain neurons poisoned by this chemical? I mean, where is the difference? Is there one? It's a serious question. It's a philosophical difficulty.

Tatsumi: So you think there might be something undecidable between religious experience and medical experience?

Sterling: I don't know where the borderline lies, and I suspect the situation is going to get much more confused in the future when you have people taking direct neural input from computers. Ryumin is the character in *Schismatrix* who represents that situation. He becomes a wirehead. He says: "Don't think of us as angels, spirits on the wire, we're not human beings. The mind is not what you think. You grip it with wire and it tends to flow." That's a crucial statement in the book. It's essentially saying that technology can come in and grab your very being, not just your body, it can come right in to the way you think, your very existence. It can come right down into the way you experience the world. It's one of the critical insights of cyberpunk. It's an emergent social and philosophical and, I think, political difficulty that the cyberpunks are forecasting.

I think that this is a useful thing for us to be doing socially. We're introducing people to these problems which as yet don't really impinge on us. But someday we will have to deal with them, and that minority of the population which is lucky enough to have read Gibson will be equipped with some tools to think about these issues before they're actually confronted with them. I think that's an important thing.

Tatsumi: Gibson might be involved in the high-tech cyber-

"The thing I really wanted to do with *Schismatrix* is distill the weak beer of conventional space opera into a sort of whiskey."

netic possibility of human existence, while Sterling might be involved in the dialectics of the mechanical and organic, like the relationship between the Shaper and the Mechanists. What gets important here is your frequent use of the image of the insect, as in "Swarm," "Spider Rose" or "Cicada Queen," so certainly insects might be the best metaphor for your cyberpunk writing. It seems to represent something mechanical within the organic. In view of your reference to MTV last year, a TV system, or video system looks like an insect. How did you get obsessed with these images?

Sterling: I used insects in the first Shaper-Mechanist story I ever wrote, "Swarm," which was inspired by a documentary I saw on television about a termite nest. As I was watching it, it suddenly occurred to me how much a termite nest resembled some sort of city, an actual city, and what it would be like to live within one. It was just one of those moments of inspiration that a writer occasionally gets. And that's by far the most insectlike of the series. But by then the identity of the insect, the image had been stamped on my mind. I sort of played on it deliberately.

It's quite true, as you point out, that insects do represent the conjunction of the organic and the mechanic. They're living, and they have a sort of intelligence and busyness, and yet they have absolutely no consciousness. They

are essentially just reflex machines. An ant colony is like a cybernetic organism, it's like a series of little micro-computers which are all programmed.

Prigogin goes on about this at great length, when he talks about order out of chaos. The activities of insects, bees and termites, are central to a lot of his arguments. When he talks about lab experiments with termites, where they build these intricate and seemingly formally planned structures from a very small number of inherent activities that they do. An individual termite has no idea what the termite nest is going to look like when he starts building, he just picks up bits of dirt and sets them down at random, and other termites do the same, but then an emergent order comes forth without any attempt at planning or rationalization, and it's extremely intricate and beautiful. It seems like the hand of God, or a blueprint, but of course it isn't. It's just the activity of these very small, very limited organisms.

Tatsumi: You've got your own insects in this house...

Sterling: I don't keep any insects. I kept mantids for a while, I have been known to keep a pet praying mantis. An uncle of mine is an entomologist, which is a family connection with insects. At the university I took courses in biology. I've just always found them intrinsicly fascinating, especially the social insects. They're like a sub-creation all their own. They're very different from us, and yet they're very elegantly designed. They seem to operate on a different kind of logic. They're like an organic parallel world where all the rules are different, but the outcomes are surprisingly parallel. They are a metaphor for the alien. They are a metaphor for activity that has gotten out of control.

It's hard to explain exactly why it is, but somehow it just has a resonance with the whole thing. The vague uneasiness and creepiness that you feel when reading a lot of the Shaper stories, and
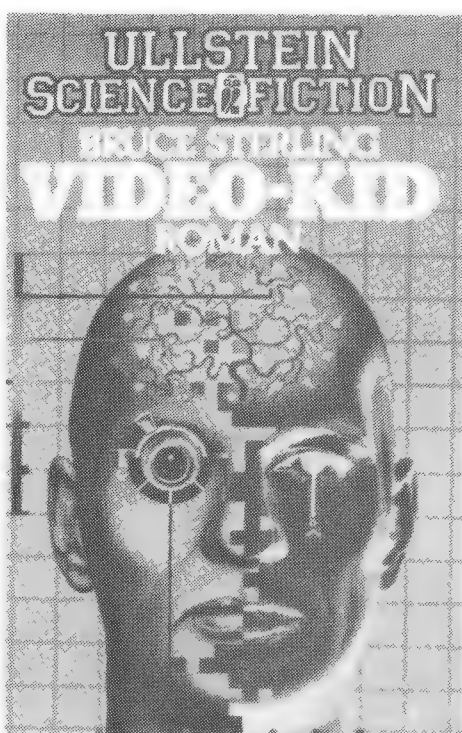
U.K. and German editions of The Artificial Kid

Japanese illustration for "The Unfolding" by Sterling and John Shirley

the constant use of insect imagery gives it... People feel a profound ambivalence about insects, and a lot of the time a hatred for them, or a loathing, and yet at the same time a painful fascination. Because they're so neat. They're all miniature and they're quite complex.

Tatsumi: Like transistors.

Sterling: Yeah. They're like little transistors. That makes a certain amount of sense. I did think that was interesting. A lot of the Japanese have an interest in insects that I think is quite remarkable. You see these very intricate Japanese drawings of katydids and locusts, right into Japanese artistic tradition, Zen ink paintings of locusts or mantids.

You don't really see that in the Western painting tradition. There are paintings of the natural world, but they always want to paint guys on horseback, stags at bay, bears or lions. The Japanese are interested in insects as part of the natural world.

Another whole organic thing in *Schismatrix* is microbes, which are like insects, only more so. Where insects are small, they're a hundred times as small. Where insects are stupid and without consciousness, they're really stupid and without consciousness. You're always conscious of microbes in *Schismatrix*, like whether a person has them on him or not, or whether an environment has them. You can't move from one place to another without getting dysentery or thrush. That is something that happens all the time to people in isolated environments, like island communities. A supply ship comes in and everybody on the island catches a cold, because they're never exposed to germs normally. Obviously, if you had a society that was made of tiny sealed spacecraft, you're going to have the same sort of biological situation. Everybody has their own germs, and their own native microbes, especially with high radiation levels. Yet it's something that's never touched on in SF,

because SF traditionally is obsessed with this sort of clean streamlined Gernsback Continuum--steel bulkheads and white unisex suits. They never think of the actual scum and dirt that supports their lives. It's an ecological approach.

Tatsumi: Did your experience in India have any influence on your fiction?

Sterling: I'm sure it did. The fascination with the Third World, the fascination with other forms of culture, what I consider to be a fairly broad sympathy for other people's way of life, I'm sure all of that is the legacy of living in India.

Tatsumi: You said you felt a kind of alienation.

Sterling: Well, yeah. You must know this. Any time you come to another country and have to plunge into their lives, you're always subjected to culture shock. Culture shock goes through stages. For six months, everything seems all novel and strange, and everything everybody does is weird and interesting. The backs of cereal boxes are strange documents. Then, after six months, you start to get really sick, and you feel like: "I've had enough of these people, what about home? Where can I get a good hamburger? Why don't they sell Scotch Tape here?"

Then, after about five years, those spasms go away, and you become completely acclimatized, and then you begin to feel that this new place is your home, and if you're taken away from it you have attacks of anxiety. So I went through that in both ways. I was in India for two and a half years, so I was just getting used to it. Then, when I returned to the States again, I had the same thing in reverse.

Tatsumi: Counterculture shock.

Sterling: Yeah, counterculture shock. It's the sense of being halfway acclimatized, and then

"It's only recently that people have learned how to produce altered states of consciousness, in some sense it's a genuine technical breakthrough, in the same sense that being able to fly is a technical breakthrough."

being plunged back in. Even if nothing untoward happens to you, it's still a rather painful experience.

Tatsumi: Literature helps. So, considering your "Sunken Gardens," we can see a comparison of terraforming to a work of art. On the other hand, Vincent Omniaveritas writes in *Interzone #14* that the new science fiction must be a work of art, throwing away the sense of regimen, of literary ghetto. Your tendency to reform human beings, who are terraforming Mars, can be considered as the metaphor for transforming science fiction itself?

Sterling: You would be making a mistake if you associated the fictional work of Bruce Sterling too closely with the literary ideology of Vincent Omniaveritas. I'm afraid the two live in different worlds, and don't have that much to do with one another--alternate worlds.

"Sunken Gardens" is not a metaphor about science fiction in any way. It

was another story that was brought to life by a particular experience that I had. I was on the island of Trinidad, briefly, and I saw a large flock of Scarlet Ibis' land in a mangrove swamp. I was looking about me, and I was surrounded by mangroves and these huge red birds. I was thinking about it, ecologically speaking, and it occurred to me that it could have been invented in some sense. I was thinking about terraforming at the time, and it struck me as a sort of art work that some very intelligent designer might have made. The Ibis' and the mangroves seemed peculiarly suited to one another, they were both wading with long stiltlike limbs. It hit me in the pattern-making side of my brain, and I felt I had to write this story. I had recently read some technical documents on the possibilities of terraforming Mars, so the two combined readily. That story is the one that is dated latest of the Shaper stories. It represents the Shaper-Mechanist milieu at its most advanced. You see the post-human philosophy, you see it at its most pitiless and direct. Because human beings are killed within the process of the story. The main characters within the story feel no pity for them whatever, because they consider them just another kind of wildlife. They no longer feel any allegiance to humanity or the human form. They consider themselves, essentially, as gods. They are as gods. They're immortal and they're extremely powerful. The standards of human morality simply don't apply to them any more.

Tatsumi: God must be an artist.

Sterling: The people within this story are demigods. Perhaps demigods are artists.

The thing about terraforming is, that in order to actually transform the surface of a planet, you, as a person, have to command cosmic amounts of power. But the thing is, if you have the power to do this, why bother? If you're already that powerful, why don't you just make yourself a god, and forget all about it?

The people who talk about terraforming, engineers and so forth, discuss it in a very mundane and silly way, as a big engineering project, like dambuilding, but obviously it would be a very transcendant act. It's not like building a lake, or digging an underground tunnel, I mean we're talking about bringing life to an entire planet here.

The thing that struck me is that terraforming might take place if you had people who are extremely powerful and advanced, who are doing it just as an amusement or a game. But it would be a game of the gods, rather than an engineering task. So, within "Sunken Gardens," it's sort of both. There are people who are doing the scutwork within these re-education camps on the surface, and then there are the transcendant gods who exist in orbit. To them it's all just a sublime game of life-creation. That's what I was playing off. I was playing off the contrast between the people on the planet's surface, who are suffering through the mundane acts of what you have to actually do to terraform a planet, and the post-people, the godlike beings in orbit who look over the thing, the suffering and everything, with a sort of Zen Buddhist smile, and they don't care. They're beyond that now.

Tatsumi: I'd like to discuss your fondness of terraforming, or reforming evolution. Is the act of terraforming a punk act?

Sterling: I don't know. I was interested in it as a scientific and engineering thing. I was interested in the technical details, and how could a society arise that would be interested in doing this? It's for quasi-mystical reasons.

Within *Schismatrix*, the whole thing about terraforming is a complex political ploy which is used by Wellspring and his lieutenant, Lindsay, as a unifying ideology for people who have become so split and alienated from one another that they no longer consider one another members of the same species. It's like saying: "Look! Here's something that

"If you're not intellectually interested in what a computer can do and what it is, then you're dead between the ears."

can get the whole gang together, and it's great, and it's wonderful, and let's do it, it'll be beautiful." That's essentially what Wellspring preaches.

You never really know if Wellspring actually believes in this. You never know what Wellspring, in Wellspring's heart of hearts, thinks. Lindsay goes along with it, but nobody knows what Lindsay thinks, including Lindsay, who's never really able to make contact with his true feelings because of what's been done to him.

Tatsumi: No ideology but aesthetics?

Sterling: Aesthetics can be an ideology. Aesthetics can be a politics. Take, for instance, Heian Japan. Japan during the Heian period, with Prince Genji and Murasaki Shikibu, and the *Pillow Book (Makura-No-Soshi)* and all that stuff. I find that period especially fascinating and I've drawn on it a lot of times within SF.

What you have is an insular aesthetocracy of aristocrats, where you're born into society to a certain extent, and you can only move so far up or so far down within the social hierarchy. But you can also gain a lot of status by your aesthetic traits, like your ability to turn a poetic phrase. If you read *Tale of Genji*, characters are always getting little one-line poetic quotations attached to a sprig of willow, then they have to write back something showing that they have recognized the literary reference. They're like a

bunch of lit critics, except that this is their whole lives.

Tatsumi: Aesthetics can be an ideology.

Sterling: Well, it's not art for art's sake, whatever it is.

I think that a lot of the cyberpunk writers are very ambitious, and they feel that they want to make a social statement that will affect society. They're evangelical, in the sense of wanting to grab people and shake them awake and say: "Look, this is what we're confronting right now. This is what's to come. This is how we should think about what's going on." The cyberpunks as a group do have an inner sense of social seriousness. They're message writers, and they want to get their message across. They're not just a group of inbred aesthetes who want to admire one another's lovely creations. I think that they feel in general that their work is about serious issues and serious problems, things that society needs to recognize and discuss and think about. They're trying to bring these things into social awareness through science fiction.

That's not the entirety of the thing. They're not all relentless agit-propagandists. I've written stories which I think are directly political stories, like "Green Days in Brunei," but at the same time I've written stories like "Telliamed," which is about the nature of the scientific enterprise, or "Dinner in Audoghast," which is about the evanescence of society and what it means to be forgotten. It's almost a mood piece, in a sense.

Tatsumi: You've got a variety of subjects.

Sterling: It's the muse. If you're going to be an actual writer of fiction, as opposed to a pamphleteer, you have to go where the muse takes you. There's a quicksilver quality to it that can't really be grasped. You have to accept that inspi-

ration as it comes. Without the spark, there's nothing. It's easy to get all mystical and goofy about the nature of inspiration. But it's an objective fact. If you have it, you have it, and if you don't, it's very difficult to fake.

Tatsumi: What makes your work and Gibson's idiosyncratic is the use of a lot of Japanesque terms, and Japanesque things. As far as the Japanesque-American novels, which are getting more and more popular, are concerned, the Japanese audience tries to examine the exactitude of their knowledge of Japan. It sounds sneaky. Nevertheless, to me, the cyberpunks seem to use the Japanesque things, as signifiers. In this case, it doesn't matter if the writers know very much about those things. Do you find any fictional strategy in making use of these Japanesque gadgets?

Sterling: I wanted to do this as a sort of little tip of the hat. Gibson and I both take the Japanese very seriously. We know. We've got you guys' number. We're paying attention. If stuff goes on over there, we want to know about it; the Japanese *Diet*, with the various godfathers and their influence circles. Plus the whole Japanese social ethos of there being a split between the official version and what's actually going on behind the curtain. It's a sort of very practiced politesse. They don't want to get involved in the direct blunt Western confrontational stuff. It's not unions versus management, or whatever, they use a different social way, and it's a very interesting thing.

I think that that social method has allowed the Japanese to successfully integrate a really shocking social change in a very short period of time. It's not that the Japanese don't have problems of the soul...god, look at America, for Christ's sake. You see the Japanese writers tear their hair about: "Oh Japan! We've lost the great spirit of *Yamato*." You see a great deal of breastbeating about: "Oh, the young

people are all going to Pachinko parlors these days."

But the Japanese that came over and saw what the Industrial Revolution has made of America...it's a fucking maelstrom over here. In Japan, you can walk through the streets at night. Try that in New York City! You wanna talk about social disintegration, America's full of handguns and drugs, things are crazy over here! Maybe you have a few teen suicides, because kids have to go to cram school until ten P.M., but they're not on cocaine. It's a system and it's working. The Japanese feel the strain because they'd like the system to work perfectly. But if they came over here and saw the apparent chaos we have, that we Americans take for granted...

Tatsumi: You seem to be interested in history, per se.

Sterling: I'm interested in history. I'm interested in sociology. What I'd like to do with a lot of my historical reading is examine the impact of technology on society. That's got to be my major theme as a writer. It comes up in all my work, even in stuff that's apparently fantasy. It's a thing that I find innately fascinating. It's the invisible changes that take place that determine what's going on in society.

Take a period like Meiji Japan. It was an amazing time, when there were guys walking around with Samurai Hakama trousers with two swords, and yet they've got a top hat and a Western pipe, and they're on a train.

That blur-point, that interzone between the past and what's emerging is what fascinates me. The whole Twentieth Century is like that. There's a revolution every ten years now. The pace of change is just insane. The pace of change has been institutionalized in a way that the Nineteenth Century couldn't have imagined, even though they thought they were changing at a breakneck pace.

You read Nineteenth Century writers and they're constantly complaining about it: "Oh, the servant problem. Oh, the lower classes are getting uppity. I

'An absolutely stunning tour de force'
HARLAN ELLISON
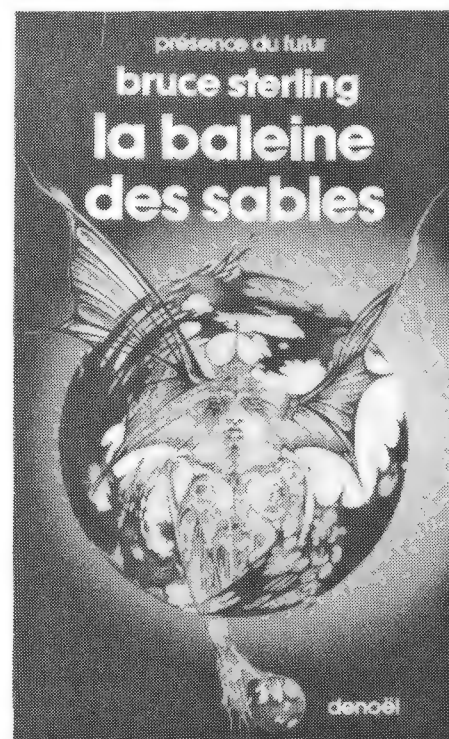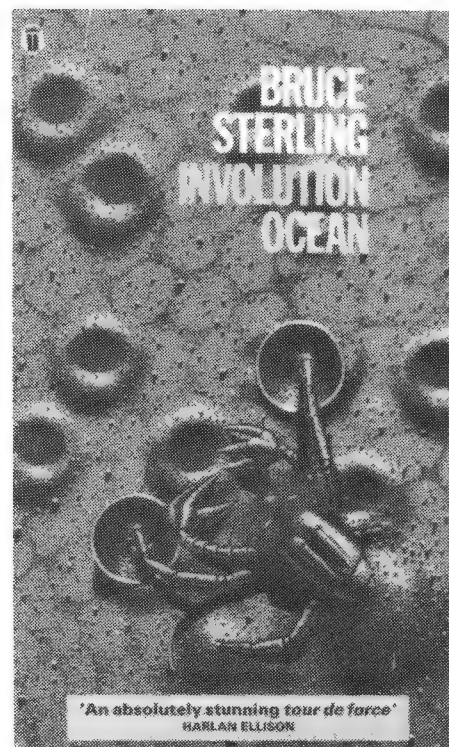
U.K. and French editions of Involution Ocean

fired my valet, and he went and got on a train and got a job in a factory." And they're just a'tearin' their hair and complaining and carryin' on.

But compared to the pace of change now, the pace of change then was glacial. You'd go crazy trying to put up with the stifling weight of Victorian tradition. Yet, if you're not aware of that, you can't really understand what's going on now, and what it is about today that makes it so bizarre.

Tatsumi: Do you think that nowadays we are confronted with the Age of Decadence?

Sterling: I don't see it as decadence, it's essentially chaos, anarchy. Decadence implies that you're falling off from some previous standard.

The thing is that the previous standard died in 1917. Ever since then it's been catch as catch can. There are no cultural figures that can determine the shape of society. Writers, especially, used to be considered the unacknowledged legislators of the world. A writer like Lord Byron had much more of a cultural impact on his period than any contemporary fiction writer or poet could hope to have today, unless something very weird happens.

People talk about the emptiness of American culture, but the thing is that there isn't an American culture, per se. There's popular culture, and there's the commercial milieu, and there's industrial social structure, and there's government. But in the sense of having a culture, in the same way that you can speak of Heian Japanese culture, or the culture of Louis XIV, it just doesn't exist. It's not that it's empty, it's that it doesn't need it. It's like a

"When I construct a story, I want to have an idea to gnaw on."

superstructure that's been sheared off. If there were one, America wouldn't be able to be what it is. It's sheared off so that everybody can run around with the sort of personal liberty that they have. It's a natural outcome.

Maybe someday we'll have a culture again, but we are certainly not going to have one until we get some sort of rein on technology. Because technology changes so rapidly that any sort of social structure that you set up is going to be demolished within a few years.

Tatsumi: So what are you planning now, first as a cyberpunk writer, and second as a member of the cyberpunk movement?

Sterling: Well, as a writer, I'm working on short stories. I'm working on one now, It's another historical fantasy. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't.

I've also got a novel in the works. It's about the 21st Century. It's a very straight and deliberate near future extrapolative novel, in the sense of Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*. It's definitely in that vein. Except, of course, that all the extrapolation is updated, and it's all drawn from the emergent social things that are here now. It's a sub-genre of SF that I've always been interested in. I've done

space opera, I've done alien planet adventure stories, now I want to tackle the extrapolative social novel. It's political, sort of Wellsian, in a sense.

Tatsumi: It just occurred to me that the difference between you and Gibson might be that while you are interested in history, writing a kind of epic science fiction, Gibson's might be a kind of lyric...

Sterling: Yeah, but he's working on an epic now, and I'm working on a lyric. We have great influence on one another, we trade ideas constantly. Gibson and I have been talking of an ambitious collaboration. Perhaps we may write a novel together. We have what I think is a really splendid idea for one. We'll see. Plus, he's got an Apple computer now. If I could talk him into buying a modem, we could send manuscripts across the phone. It seems like a very ideologically correct thing for two cyberpunks to do, write over the phone lines.

Even if weren't a writer, I'd still like to mess with computers. It's not a pretense, or a put-on, or an affectation on my part, they're fascinating. They're the greatest toys in the world. They're intrinsically interesting. If you're not intellectually interested in what a computer can do and what it is, then you're dead between the ears. You're not living in the 1980's. If I gave up writing, then I'd have more time to fool with my computers. They're a constant temptation.

Tatsumi: That might be a nice conclusion for this interview. Thank you so much. ●

Steve Stiles

SCIENCE FICTION RESEARCH ASSOCIATION PANEL
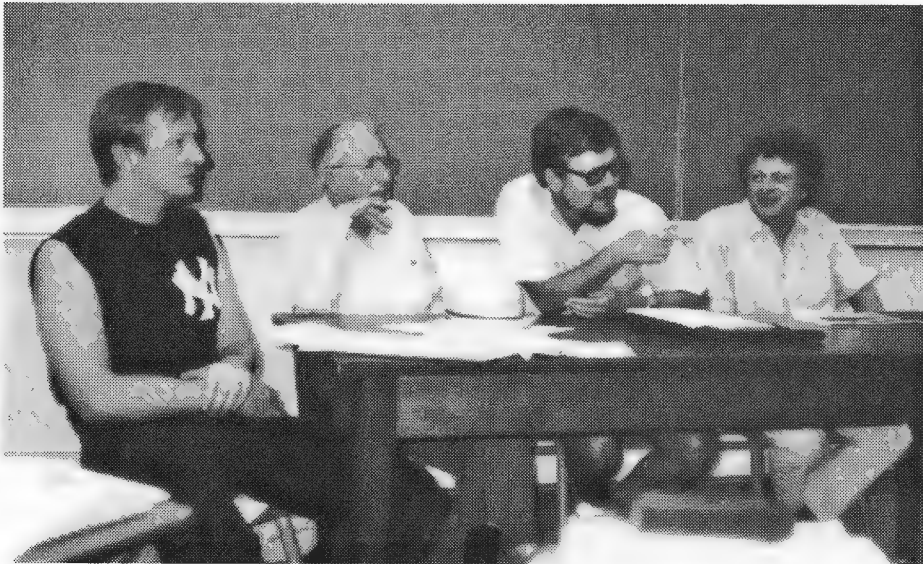
John Shirley, Jack Williamson, Gregory Benford, Norman Spinrad

"Cyberpunk of Cyberjunk? Some Perspectives on Recent Trends in SF"

With John Shirley, Jack Williamson, Norman Spinrad, and Gregory Benford (with interruptions by David Brin)

JUNE 28, 1986

Spinrad: One reason I'm on this panel is because I wrote a piece in *Asimov's* which was published two or three months ago called "The Neuromantics," in which I attempted to rename the Cyberpunk movement the Neuromantic movement.

I think what we're dealing with here is two overlaid phenomena.

One is that, unlike the New Wave movement, you've got the Cyberpunk movement, who do consider themselves a movement, and to some extent are a clique. You can define it by a certain number of writers: Shirley, and Bill Gibson, and Rudy Rucker, and Bruce Sterling, Pat Cadigan. This a group of writers who have some communal feeling and consider themselves a movement. If you look at their works, they're very different in many ways. John Shirley's stuff is much more overtly political than any of the other writers. Bruce Sterling is much more an almost traditional hard science writer. Rudy Rucker writes mathematical comic stories. So in a way, these things differ, which harks back to the New Wave phenomenom. The New Wave, from an outside viewpoint, seemed like a lot of other things, because it was a bunch of people who were trying to change something that was monolithic.

In other words, in the Sixties there was a certain unstated ideology. You had to be positive about science, you had strong heros, you had to have this and that, not deal with sex, the whole litany. So when you had people who were breaking out of that mold, the people who were still in the mold tended to view them as all being the same kind of thing. When actually, the kind of stuff that I was writing, was very different, say, from what Jimmy Ballard was writing, which was very different from what Mike Moorcock was writing, and so on and so forth. The same thing is going on...there's something happening on here.

Shirley: (singing) "What it is ain't exactly clear."

Spinrad: It has an unfortunate cliqueish aspect to it, too, which, unlike the New Wave, has been encouraged by the people involved in it. Because, you cannot define what's really going on by just a list of writers. It's not very consistent. It excludes people like Greg Bear, who I would contend is writing the same sort of thing.

Benford: They're all new writers, except they're all different. I think they're more in the older mold than the new one.

Shirley: Mold is the word. Moldy is the word.

Spinrad: I would like to open this by suggesting that there is a core aesthetic thing involved in this Neuromantic thing, and that is, that in the Sixties, in science fiction, (as in the culture at large) the dichotomy grew up in the public consciousness among writers of a split between the romantic impulse and science and technology.

A lot of people who were fighting the New Wave at that point were screaming that these people were anti-science, anti-rational. Whereas some of the more extreme people in the New Wave were calling everybody else techonocrats and fascists.

So a split grew up between the romantic impulse on one hand, and science and technology on the other. A false dichotomy. This went on and on and on through the Seventies, the ecological movement appeared, up through *Star Wars*.

To me the second order punk movement of the Seventies, was not like real punk—where the guys in the Fifties standing on street corners who would cut you up with a switchblade as soon as look at you were the real punks.

I lived through it, John, don't tell me.

Shirley: The word doesn't mean that.

"You cannot define what's really going on by just a list of writers."

—SPINRAD

Spinrad: The point is that the use of the word was misleading, because the punks of the Seventies were intellectual punks. It was a reaction against the bellbottom wimpiness and stylized look of the counterculture.

Where this fits into the cyberpunk movement is that the paradox at the heart of this dichotomy, even in the Sixties, was that the counterculture, was involved with expressing all this through electronic music. Without the amplified guitar and synthesizer, there wasn't any rock'n'roll. Rock'n'roll was the music, at that time, of the anti-rational, anti-science aspect of it.

So the punk thing in the Seventies, being a reaction to that, ties into the cyberpunk thing, which is why I prefer to call it "Neuromantics."

What I think is common in Shirley's stuff, Sterling, Gibson, Greg Bear, a lot of other stuff, is the fusion of the romantic impulse with science and technology. That these things are not dichotomous.

I think that is where there really is something going on.

I think that is also what people really get disturbed about, because this is an old dichotomy, which has been thoroughly engrained in people's minds on both sides of this so-called schism for a very long time now.

Shirley: You're saying it's just another version of the science fiction New Wave?

Spinrad: No, because the New Wave phenomenom tended to set up a division between romantic impulses

and science and technology, and cyberpunk fuses it.

There's something else that these things tend to have in common, is that Greg Bear's *Blood Music*, Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*, to some extent *Neuromancer*, and even some of Pat Cadigan's stuff, are really dealing with an explosion of our definition of human. In *Blood Music*, the human race evolves through a cellular level, and you have a very Chardinian no-osphere kind of an illusion.

In Bruce Sterling's book, which is even more radical, he basicly delivers about body image, because there the consciousness doesn't change, but the physical aspects of people radiate in all different kinds of directions so they don't even look like people any more, but they talk and they are people.

And in *Eclipse*, rock'n'roll mentalities, and the media reality is transcending the actual flesh and blood reality.

I think that one of the things that makes it disturbing to people is that it's screwing with their feelings about body image, which is really scary.

I will conclude with something that Greg (Bear) said at that horrendous panel in Austin, where he said: "What's a nice boy like me doing on a cyberpunk panel like this?" And then he asked a question: "How many people in this audience think that human beings are going to look recognizably like human beings fifty years from now?" Then he said: "Why, you're all wrong." I think that's one of the things that's really disturbing about that.

Benford: Let me lodge a perhaps brief caveat. I'm not an enemy of this literary movement. Largely, I would like to dissolve it. I'm an enemy of movements, and particularly I'm an enemy of movements that proceed first by issuing a manifesto, and then by rummaging around trying to find something to represent it.

Look. Let's take some of your examples. The end of *Blood Music*? That's the same end as *Childhood's End*.

Do you want stories in which body

image, and the merging of machine technology and the body is apparent? Look at the work of Samuel R. Delany, or "Waldo."

None of these elements, in fact, are new, and what you will have to maintain is that it is in some way a unique blending of them.

The permutations of them are what is new.

Shirley: It's not the ideas, but the ideas about the ideas.

Benford: But that's not the case you've made yet. I'm not saying it's not true, I'm just saying that you haven't made that case yet.

Shirley I'm about to.

Benford: So let's be sure we know what we're talking about first. I am always bothered by reductionism, and this is another way to be reductionist about science fiction; to say: "Here is what's happening over here." Meanwhile, all these other things are happening.

The incorporation, in Michael Swanwick's article in the latest *Asimov's*, of essentially just anybody into a movement in order to get them into joining the club, makes it appear that it is simply careerism.

Take seventeen guys who came in at the same time you did and say: "We are a movement." This is a nice way to get attention, but it doesn't make any literary sense.

Shirley: Getting attention makes literary sense.

Benford: It makes economic sense, but it doesn't necessarily make literary sense or critical sense. Getting attention is pleasant, but it doesn't make hay.

The problem I have, is that people like Pat Cadigan, with really no remote connection to anybody else in cyberpunk, is routinely included in the corps. Why, because she's friends of the people

"I think it's literary terrorism."

—BENFORD

who are in the corps. And the same thing is true of Connie Willis and Kim Stanley Robinson...

Shirley: Kim Stanley Robinson has nothing to do with it, he's...

Benford: Go and read Swanwick's article. He's got every one of them in the article. Come on, you can't lie about it. It is in there.

Shirley: But Swanwick is full of shit.

Benford: That's exactly the point I wanted to make. It is simply a marketing phenomenom, it is not a literary movement.

Spinrad: I don't agree with that at all. Surely nothing rises out of a vacuum. But I think the difference, at least statistically, that makes this somewhat different, is that the attitude towards the transformation of body image is positive in cyberpunk, whereas in most of the old...

Benford: It wasn't in Varley? And if you go back to C. L. Moore, it wasn't positive?

Shirley: This is niggling little bullshit. This has nothing to do with the general trend of the movement.

Benford: John, I think you should define what you think cyberpunk is, and we'll attack it.

Shirley: I think it's very interesting that there's such a strong impulse to attack it. We've been getting a lot of attack. We've

been getting a lot of reaction, really prejudiced reaction. I think it's ironic. Yesterday you read somebody else's acceptance speech, in which the writer said that science fiction's reception on the part of mainstream critics was stodgy and traditionalist and unreasonable. I think you're taking exactly the same attitude towards cyberpunk. Let me quote from Bruce Sterling about the term, which was invented by Gardner Dozois, and now it's stapled on, and it throws a lot of people off.

Chairman Bruce says: *"The term now seems a fait accompli. We're stuck with it. But there is a certain justice in it, because it captures something crucial to the work of these writers, something crucial to the decade as a whole, a new kind of integration. The overlapping of worlds that were formerly separate: the realm of high-tech, and the modern pop underground, and the modern art underground."*

Now let me tell you what I think characterizes cyberpunk, and I use the term because we're stuck with it, and it's easy. I think it's characterized by writers who have a global worldview. They write with an attitude informed by information arising from the so-called underground, who write with a certain intensity of tone that's sometimes taken for punk, who are influenced by writers outside the science fiction genre, by certain aspects of the rock culture, the better aspects...

Benford: Some of the worst ones, too.

Shirley: (Well, sometimes,)...who realize that antiheros are not really antiheroic, who search for real honesty in characterization, and who write with the perspective of a new, constantly transforming global flux of worldwide media. It's not what you seem to think it is. And I'm not done.

Benford: I didn't say that.

Shirley: There's been a lot of shit slung, and I want the opportunity to respond.

One of the charges is that cyberpunk's ideas lack originality. You just don't get it. You _just don't get it._ You're ignorant of certain things, I'm sorry. There are layers of current cultural references in Gibson's work, or in my novel _Eclipse_, for that matter, that you probably aren't picking up on, so you don't get the ideas that are codified within them. A lot of these ideas aren't couched in the usual SF terms.

What does William Gibson really mean when he says, for example, "the street finds its own uses for things."

That is an idea.

That is an idea about the nature of the future and our relationship to technology in the future. A lot of cyberpunk's ideas have to do with our relationship to technology, with its effects on us that are taking place now. Cyberpunk is helping us to adapt to the way that technology is affecting us now.

There are also insights into the texture of daily life in the future in Gibson, not the Mr. Wizard fascination with obsolete visions of megamachines and simplistic notions of what expansion into space will be like.

A lot of cyberpunk has to do with emphasizing the importance, the literary importance, the poetic importance, and the sociological importance of the background texture of life in the worlds that we're describing.

But even with respect to clear-cut science fiction ideas, cyberpunk writers are often innovators.

One wellspring of new ideas is Bruce Sterling's novel, _Schismatrix_. Bruce explores O'Neil-type colonies as no one else has. He has new ideas about old ideas. He was the first to describe a colony's ecological crash, which is something that's inevitable when these things finally come about. He gives us startling new applications of microbiology. He gives us fresh ideas on the social impact of cutting-edge biological-electronic techniques. He's the only one to really extrapolate on the implications of clades and daughter species and evolution theory in science fiction. Who else has done that? Nobo-

"They're whole new infusions of cultural input that science fiction has, until cuberpunk, ignored."

--SHIRLEY

dy. His treatment of space colonies as biological and social petri dishes is unsurpassed.

This is something I do in _Eclipse_, also. In _Eclipse_ I discuss the political dangers of an O'Neil colony's social infrastructure. I'm not attacking O'Neil colonies, I'm not saying we shouldn't have them, I'm saying look out for the political dangers involved in the way that they would have to be administered. To me, that's an idea, it's a sociological idea, it's a political idea.

Sociological and political ideas are just as valid as technological ones.

We're also taking a lot of old SF ideas. Yes, Samuel Delany's _Nova_ is considered to be one of the progenitors of the cyberpunk movement. We're taking new looks at them through the lens of contemporary experience, and contemporary information input that we haven't had until now. And I mean very contemporary, and I mean last week. Cyberpunk really emphasizes constant updating. That lens, that new lens is showing us previously unexplored aspects of old ideas. It may be that we're seeing those old ideas, through cyberpunk, clearly for the first time.

Now we are not saying (somebody accused me of saying this) that it's the only interesting stuff happening in science fiction, that it's the only important literature. There are lots of great science fiction writers who aren't cyberpunks, and a bunch of them are in this room. Lucius Shepard is not cyberpunk, and I think he's one best writers

anywhere, in any field. I think he's great. Nancy Kress is not cyberpunk, excellent writer.

We acknowledge that.

But we think cyberpunk is something very important, and part of what's important about it, is that it reflects changes that are happening in society as a whole. There're whole new infusions of cultural input that science fiction has, until cyberpunk, ignored. We've culturally had our heads in the sand, and cyberpunk demands that we face the future, the artistic future, and the ideological future, and the technological future without the technocratic bias that is essentially a kind of extrapolative masturbation. Too often. Not always, but too often.

Instead of using the field as a kind of pleasant self-stimulus, cyberpunk is offering a way to provide a medium that is entertaining, we're very interested in writing entertaining stuff, but also we want to be scarily challenging. We feel that too much of the majority of the field hasn't been. It's been playing with itself.

Williamson: At this point I'd like to say something to justify my presence here.

I've been writing science fiction for something like sixty years, and I see science fiction as a response to change, about change. As a writer, I've, at times, continually over most of these decades, met new writers that are good and writing new stuff, so the cyberpunk to me is a sort of repetition of things that are going on in their area of expertise.

F. Warren Tremaine had a category of what he called thought-variance stories. I did one of them. They were revolutionary ideas that rocked the field. I'm just in the middle of reading Greg's _Blood Music_, and it strikes me as a story that I would have been proud to write, and that Tremaine would have been happy to accept as an thought-variant piece.

This matter of revolution keeps occurring. Campbell had his Golden Age. Horace Gold and Tony Boucher redid the

world, and the world keeps being reborn over and over again, so I have a certain sympathetic interest in cyberpunk, though I haven't read much of it. But I have a sort of sense at this point that I've got the essence of it from watching a film called *Bladerunner*, which has that sense of gritty reality and human change, generally I thought it was an admirable film.

I'll be interested in reading more of the cyberpunk material with a sympathetic eye.

I don't think I'll be writing cyberpunk myself, but maybe I can pick up a few stylistic mannerisms.

Shirley: It is part of a cyclic thing. And it is a healthy cyclic thing. I think it's important to realize that it's not the same "wave" as the New Wave, redux, it draws on cultural influences that are particular to our era. The ones in the Sixties were a different set of cultural influences. Also, we have an information explosion, and it has a lot to do with that, in a way that's hard to describe.

Spinrad: Rudy Rucker said something about that which really bothered me. He tended to define cyberpunk in terms of density of information conveyed. But he was not dealing with the question of the quality of the data. Sometimes you can have an excess of data, you can have so much data overload that you can lose the meaning in the noise.

Shirley: Like Delany's new novel.

AUDIENCE: You mean it's about that, or it features that?

Shirley: It suffers from that.

Spinrad: But that may be a good definition of cyberpunk, is that there could be bad cyberpunk as well as good cyberpunk. It does have something to do with density of information and density of imagery.
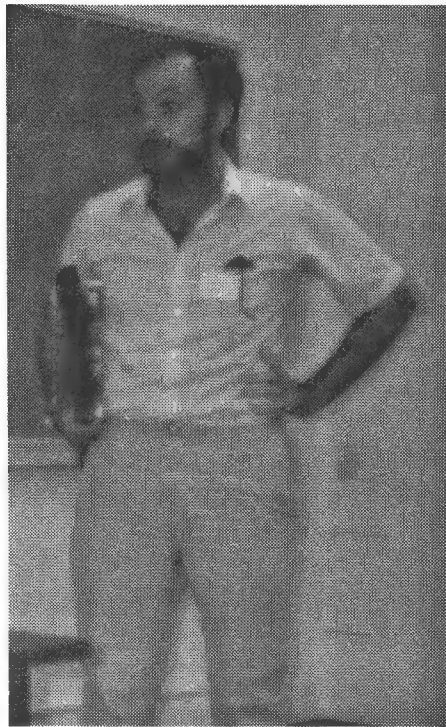
David Brin interrupting

Shirley: Also, we emphasize style, new standards of stylistic quality and characterization quality. We incorporate some old ideas, of course, but we feel they were lost in the Seventies, that ground gained by the New Wave in the Sixties and early Seventies was lost, and once again we were overwhelmed by shoddy writing.

Williamson: We're always overwhelmed by shoddy writing.

Shirley: We're trying to get our hands on the tiller again.

Spinrad: I think a very important aspect of it is that it is influenced by non-genre writing. The interest of the people involved in it are not circumscribed by the little world of science fiction and fantasy.

Benford: Norman, do you know of any science fiction writers who are not heavily influenced by other genres of writing?

Shirley: Most of them read like they haven't read anything outside the field.

Benford: I mean those of them that are influential, not those who are just dropping stories. Name a few.

Spinrad: Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, Alan Dean Foster, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein.

Shirley: Heinlein reads like he's read outside the genre—he reads like he's read westerns! He's a sometimes a brilliant writer, of course. It's just that we see no reason why there can't be literary quality, reasonable literary quality, and entertainment value, and ideas.

Spinrad: There's something else about this outside influence that's really interesting. You can trace it through the New Wave as well. It's another thing that disturbs people about this very much. There's a whole strain of American literature, to some extent world literature, but mainly American, that goes from Whitman to Henry Miller to Kerouac to Ginsberg up through some of the science fiction of that period, of William Burroughs being the pivotal figure.

Benford: Burroughs is cyberpunk.

Spinrad: This is a literary strain that has been shoved in a corner by the larger critical establishment. You don't see that much stuff about Kerouac and Burroughs. This strain sort of went through the New Wave, and some of that comes out in cyberpunk. So you have an influence here that didn't start in science fiction at all, but that somehow, through the Sixties and Seventies, comes out through science fiction more than it does anywhere else. You don't see this Kerouac, Burroughs, Miller influence in too many other places in American literature.

Brin: What they have in common is something that I think is right at the heart of this question. And that is the sense of alienation. When John was mentioning all the things that he's proud of in cyberpunk, it was essentially a list of all of the things that good literature should have. In other words, claiming that this is our movement, and it has all of these things, is like saying, I am a man, and I am brave, trustworthy, loyal, smart, good-looking. In other words, all of the things that were claimed for cyberpunk, about information, about good writing, about new ideas, exploring new territory, these are all qualities that we would like to see in fine SF.

Shirley: You weren't listening closely. That's a generalization of what I said. I got a lot more specific than that.

Benford: David, you're trying to make John wholesome.

Spinrad: Bullshit.

Brin: But I'd like to know if what you said about anti-heros aren't necessarily antiheros...

Spinrad: The antihero, from the point of view of people talking about antiheros, is really somebody who doesn't hold the cultural values of the society in which they find themselves. They're not alienated nihilists. Anybody who doesn't believe, anybody who doesn't share the view of the tribe are always called nihilists. You don't believe in what we believe in, therefore you believe in nothing, and you're a nihilist.

Benford: What about Camus now? Let's throw Camus in here.

Spinrad: That's a real nihilist.

Brin: I wasn't intending to be insulting by saying that there's a threat of alienation. What I was exploring...

"The punks of the Seventies were intellectual punks. It was a reaction against the bell-bottom wimpiness and stylized look of the counterculture."

—SPINRAD

Shirley: What about Henry Rollins? What about Dennis Cooper? What do you think of those writers?

Benford: I haven't read either of them.

Shirley: I know you haven't. These are examples of writers that probably no one but the cyberpunks have read.

Benford: What about William J. Emerson?

Shirley: I'm not saying that we're more well-read than you, I'm saying that there's a whole style of writing that we are acknowledging, a whole alternative culture that we're aware of, that we're allowing into our mindsets that you guys aren't, because you're not even aware of yet.

Benford: In all that you've said (and I can hardly disagree with any of it), you are coming on so wholesome that all of the pink-haired ladies in the audience are going to rush up and embrace you if you're not careful. Where is the anger and the energy that we sensed earlier? Where has this all gone?

Shirley: The point is that the thing's not a ridiculous wild idea. It's reasonable.

Benford: We've been falling asleep up here.

Shirley: You're imposing somebody else's arbitrary ideas on me, it's a cliche.

Brin: You mentioned art, you mentioned rock'n'roll, and you mentioned what Greg just spoke about, some degree of anger.

Shirley: You've gotta read the fucking books.

Brin: I HAVE!

Shirley: You haven't read *Eclipse*, I'll bet.

Brin: I haven't read *Eclipse*, yet, but I've certainly read *Schismatrix* and *Neuromancer* and *Burning Chrome*.

Shirley: Don't tell me there's no anger in *Neuromancer*...

Brin: That's my point! That's the point. In all the list of wholesome things, are things that we all strive for, and maybe you're claiming you're achieving them better than us. But, there are some things thematically in what's called cyberpunk, and I don't include Bear and Rucker under this way of distinguishing it, I think that's a claim on your part. Excluding Bear and Rucker, what you've got is anger and this kind of alienation that Norman and I agreed about, the antihero business...

Spinrad: No! Don't include...

Brin: I'm sorry, I think this type of alienation is what you described, okay?

Spinrad: Well, I disagree with that.

Brin: Perhaps that's the wrong word.

Shirley: Again and again I've had manuscripts rejected by editors who say that the heros are not pleasant enough, that they're not...

Brin: Go with it! This is what I want to hear about, because I feel that there's a distinction.

Shirley: There's still too much of this attitude in science fiction. I'm sympathetic to these characters. I identify with my characters. Robert Silverberg had this response to something I wrote, he said: "If these characters, were at a party with me, I wouldn't want to even stand next to them, they're so loathesome." Silverberg, you're talking about my best friends!

A large part of what seems repugnant about these people is that you're standing on the outside and they're part of an alien tribe. It's a tribal difference, really.

Spinrad: It's something else, too, John. It's also level of rendering of character, level of verisimilitude. Most science fiction protagonists...

Shirley: That's an old problem...

Benford: No one ever rejected you for having unpleasant characters.

Shirley: Again and again and again.

Brin: For being an unpleasant character.

Shirley: I've had to fight for publication for those characters who were not conventionally sympathetic in the way that I was taught they should be.

Brin: Do you consider K.W. Jeter a cyberpunk?

"I'm an enemy of movements that proceed first by issuing a manifesto, and then by rummaging around trying to find something to represent it."

--BENFORD

Shirley: It took ten years for Jeter to sell *Dr. Adder*, and his new book--because of that.

Brin: Would you call him a cyberpunk?

Shirley: He's an antecedent.

Spinrad: He's still alive, so he's not an antecedent.

Shirley: His new book, *The Glass Hammer*, is cyberpunk.

Williamson: If you want to look at a story of someone struggling into print, look at James Joyce. They printed his book of short stories in Dublin...

AUDIENCE: Look at the information density in *Finnegan's Wake*.

Spinrad: I am sympathetic to this stuff, as you know John. But there's one thing that you've done that disturbs me today. You're invoking the royal "We."

Shirley: Solidarity!

Spinrad: That's what disturbs me a little bit.

Shirley: It is, to some extent, bullshit. But it is for the sake of argument.

Williamson: The sad thing about cyberpunk is not the books the cyberpunks write, it's not the fiction, it's their saying that everybody else is no good.

Shirley: Oh no, c'mon. I repeatedly have said that we do not maintain that. I think you're good.

Benford: On that point you have just destroyed the whole revolution.

Shirley: I never said the other stuff wasn't any good. Don't be narrowminded. I just say that cyberpunk is probably the most important movement in science fiction at the moment.

Brin: A movement is defined by its members. Cyberpunk's the only one...

Shirley: No, there's still a Libertarian movement, there's still a Libertarian conservative anti-intellectual antiliterary movement. It's still crystallizing, and still hammering at us.

Benford: They're not intellectual giants.

Shirley: Well, that's the problem, isn't it? I mean, Pournelle is a very intellectual guy, actually. He's just antiliterary in a lot of ways. The antiliterary thing is a movement, it's the prevailing movement. We're a countermovement.

Benford: I'm so not sure that that's correct. I believe that the movement that is embodied by people all the way from Norman to

Varley to the cyberpunks is, in fact, very popular now. It may, within the next two or three years, dominate.

Spinrad: There's one thing you've gotta say for all of this. That since the beginning of the Seventies, all the talk about science fiction has been about advances, booms, busts, money. This is the first time that there really is any energy around in a literary argument, at least you can say that about it. I think that even if the stuff was all crap that it would make it useful to the evolution of...

Brin: Norman's right, the reaction to it is more important than the action.

Benford: I think it's literary terrorism. But the thing that's really cool about cyberpunk is that it does tend to bring the genre back into a clear focus on traditional values.

What bothers me, and it's just a gut feeling, is I'm always against a reductionist spirit of attempting to steamroller all the differences between these diverse and growing writers into a corral.

What is interesting about Bruce Sterling is not what he has in common with Bill Gibson.

What's interesting about you is not what you have in common with Bruce Sterling.

Shirley: That's because you haven't perceived what's interesting about us, you haven't picked up on it yet. You are not culturally online.

Benford: You're saying that: "If you don't agree with my view of this field, then you haven't understood it."

Shirley: What if you haven't? What if you have a blind spot?

Benford: I haven't read every little piece, but I've read a lot

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—SPINRAD

of it, and I've thought about it, and a lot of it I've liked. Christ! I was in favor of putting *Schismatrix* on the Nebula ballot!

Shirley: But you don't understand it, because you're not culturally online.

Benford: What do you mean? That's bullshit, John. Just wait a second. You were talking in the previous hour about how nobody's concerned about toxic waste. In 1980 I published a novel which is a simple metaphor about toxic waste, called *Timescape*, long before you knew what toxic waste was. You may have heard of it.

My point is that you can't simply accuse people of not knowing what's coming down, John, because they don't agree with your literary values.

Shirley: That's not why I don't agree with this, because they're demonstrating they're not.

They're demonstrating by these wild misinterpretations. Listen to this. Listen to Chairman Bruce...

AUDIENCE: (various voices heard through pandemonium) Wait! Wait! Wait! I can't hear anybody. ORDER! Now, first you, and then you, okay? Let him read. John and then Dave. We want to hear from Chairman Bruce first.

Benford: He'll say we don't know what's coming down. Prove me wrong.

AUDIENCE: Let him read.

Shirley: It says right here: "The counterculture of the 1960's was rural, romanticized, antiscience, antitech."

That's what Norman said.

"There was always a lurking contradiction at the heart of the Sixties counterculture, symbolised by the electric guitar. Rock technology was the thin edge of the wedge. As years have passed, rock tech has grown ever more accomplished, now expanding into high-tech recording, satellite video, and computer graphics. Slowly it is turning rebel pop-culture inside out; until the artists at pop's cutting edge are now, quite often, cutting-edge technicians in the bargain. They are special effects wizards, mixmasters, tape-effects techs, graphics hackers; emerging through new media to dazzle society with head-trip extravaganzas like FX cinema, or the global LIVE AID benefit. The contradiction has become an integration.

"And now that the technology has reached a fever pitch, its influence has slipped control and reached street level. The technical revolution reshaping our society is based not in hierarchy, but in decentralization."

This is in answer to your reductionism stuff.

"Not in rigidity, but in fluidity. The hacker and the rocker are this decade's pop culture idols. Cyberpunk is very much a pop phenomenom, spontaneous, energetic, close to its roots. Cyber-

punk comes from the realm where the computer hacker and the rocker overlap, a cultural petri dish where writhing gene lines splice. Some find the results bizarre, even monstrous. For others, this integration is a powerful source of hope."

It goes on for a couple of pages. The point is, what we're doing is we're drawing from a lot of different sources, and we're stoking ourselves with it, and then we're taking that and expanding on it. We're not narrowing things. And, as a movement, the term "cyberpunk" is arbitrary and a convenient forum for a new movement and new ideas. It's just getting a taste of it.

Spinrad: Can I ask you a question, John? This is the part that I don't understand, and that is, why the necessity for the plural "we" you can't get away from, and.

Shirley: Because I think it is a movement. It's hard to define, but we know it when we see it.

Williamson: I agree. It's a movement. It's been the main movement of science fiction for sixty years.

Shirley: I don't think so, because a whole lot of influences that are in it now weren't present before.

Williamson: Each generation has new ideas, new convictions...

Shirley: Newness doesn't always define it.

Brin: It seems that what we have here is that none of these people have been sent on a Long March. And it hasn't come together because they haven't been in exile for ten years and come back with glory. What happens for this movement to be solidified, it now has to be severely abused and mistreated. The main problem with every revolution in science fiction is that the revolutionaries have come up bit-

ching, moaning, complaining, wearing new clothes...

Benford: You should go write your books and I think it's bullshit that there's a movement.

Shirley: You don't want to believe there is because it frightens you. Because you think you're not competent to handle the new idiom of it.

Brin: All right. You insult me by claiming that I am too puerile to understand. I'll return the favor by saying that I believe that you are responding to a need to gather the circle of a tribe because you can't stand on your own.

Shirley: Where does this can't stand on my own stuff come from?

Brin: Forget it. I retract it. Can I just ask my question? I gotta go.

AUDIENCE: Yes, you can leave the room.

Brin: All right. You've established that in all the things that we all treasure and want; characterization, ideas, beautiful writing and all that, you are elegant and innovative and much better than anybody else around except for a couple of people that you pat on the head.

Shirley: No, no, no. I didn't say that.

Brin: But, beyond that, we've also established that you like anger, and you like people who are on the outside.

Shirley: It's not for its sake. There's a reason for anger, sometimes.

Brin: I like the way that it's been done, in a lot of your books. The question is, what do you think of the future? In all of

these novels, I see future civilizations in which we learn nothing from this century, in which the stupidities are going to continue, in which the people are going to get worse...

Shirley: That's what we're scared of. That's why we're writing about it. We're writing warnings about those things. We don't think there's been enough of them. Most of us are writing about the near future, okay, I'm writing about the near future. I can't speak for Bruce.

Brin: You're writing about the near past.

Shirley: Part of what we're interested in doing is taking extremely contemporary situations, extrapolating them into the very near future, because we're talking about the world that we're coming to grips with in this generation or the very next generation.

Brin: Do you offer ways out?

Shirley: Sometimes. We offer warning signs about it, first you have to identify the problem.

Brin: All right. Maybe I misread, but I've got to admit that in a couple of these novels I've felt not, here's a warning and there are ways out, but we're going into the tank and there's nothing that can be done.

Spinrad: Is that not valid?

Brin: There's a question. I wasn't trying to make a point, it was a question and you answered it. Thank you.

Benford: This whole thing is going to sell books like crazy.

Shirley: That's not our concern.

AUDIENCE: (prolonged applause) ●

THE H

by John Kessel

ONE

Last summer Michael Swanwick labeled a group of newer SF writers "Humanists" in his controversial article, "A User's Guide to the Postmoderns" in *Asimov's SF Magazine*. I was one of them. It's a label I'm not uncomfortable with, and in a little bit I'm going to take this characterization and run with it, but I want to make the following qualifications: first, I think all labels can dangerously distort our perceptions of writers' work; second, I think dividing writers into groups can foster unnecessary competitiveness--writing is not a foot race; and third, I think Michael's article, for understandable reasons perhaps, left too much unsaid, too many people unmentioned, too many similarities unnoted, and may have contributed to unnecessary ill will. It's better to be noticed than unnoticed, but it's ironic to me that I've had more reaction in the *Asimov's* letter column to a single quote, taken out of context, that Michael reported from me, than to the five stories I've published in that magazine since 1983. ("Most of the best modern SF can't stand up to the best fiction outside the field for the last couple hundred years. If we want to make it in

the big leagues, we have to face big league pitching.") All of these reactions were negative. I consider them understandable, and though I'd much rather be noticed than ignored, I wonder about the usefulness of all this.

Be that as it may, I do agree with Michael that there is a group of SF writers who might fairly be called "humanists." I don't think that they differ in any significant way from a lot of writers who have been publishing in SF for twenty years or more, however. Although in the end I can only speak for myself, I would say that a humanist SF writer would have the following traits:

1) A knowledge and appreciation of literature outside SF, including so-called "literary" fiction, the "classics." Perhaps even some formal training in literature. But at the very least not a disdain for the study of English.

2) A suspicion of the formal structure of the so-called "literary establishment." They may have read James Joyce, but they are skeptical about the critical industry that has arisen upon his works, and of academic critics who use the works of Joyce and others as clubs to beat SF.

3) Love for science fiction and popular fiction in general. The idea that SF and literary values are not

incompatible.

4) Interest in character, plot, story mechanics. A love for well-crafted fiction, for good prose.

5) A belief that individual people are important, that even though any realistic cosmic perspective dwarfs the individual into insignifance, human values have importance, that they are worth writing about even though they have been written about over and over through the centuries, that invigorating fiction can in fact be written through the clash of human values and the vast perspectives of the future, of evolution, of social change available through SF.

6) A hesitance to make categorical statements about SF, especially statements that exclude. A humanist, in my usage, is someone who prizes the middle ground, who prefers to describe rather than prescribe.

TWO

Swanwick and I invented the term BOFFO at a convention in August 1984. At that time the hype about cyberpunk was just starting to really take off; William Gibson's *Neuromancer* had just been published, and Vincent Omniaveritas in *Cheap Truth* had objected to the grouping together of writers like Gibson,

UMANIST MANIFESTO

Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, Lew Shiner, Greg Bear and Pat Cadigan with fuzzy minded literary types like Connie Willis, Pat Murphy, James Patrick Kelly, Kim Stanley Robinson, Swanwick and me. Michael wasn't sure he had been placed in the right camp (it was pretty clear already that the theorists at *Cheap Truth* were going to force people into camps whether they liked it or not); I tried to convince him he was another literary type, and we concocted the "Boring Old Farts Organization," or BOFFO.

I liked the name because I really couldn't believe that there were grounds for some kind of war between these groups. I had liked the writing of all the writers who were now being called "punks" from the moment I first read any of it. I was one of the first people to praise Lew Shiner's work, I had known Pat Cadigan from the time she and I had both been students at the University of Kansas, I had nominated Sterling's "Spider Rose" for the Hugo and Nebula, and I had even, in a talk to the North Carolina State English Club in March 1983, tried to identify a kind of punk SF, specifically mentioning Shiner and Cadigan. I couldn't believe their aims were so radically different from my own. I was an English professor, I was in some cases a year or two older, I liked Flan-

nery O'Connor more than Larry Niven, I thought the values of the new wave weren't dead. What was the big deal? BOFFO was a joke, a way to say, "Sure, Vince, if you feel the need for an enemy, we'll be the boring representatives of the status quo and you can be the fiery young revolutionaries. Just let's not get carried away."

Since then Bruce Sterling has educated me as to Vince's opinions. Vince is deadly serious, and he has a point. So I'll be deadly serious for awhile, too.

THREE

Cheap Truth has closed up shop, and thank God. It might better have been called *Cheap Shots*. Although it did serve a useful purpose in challenging assumptions about how and why SF should be written, at least eighty percent of it was vapid cant, and most of the good it attempted to do was undermined by ad hominum arguments, unsupported ranting, ego stroking and hyperbole. I say this having come to the conclusion that at least Vincent Omniaveritas is right about many things he has to say about science fiction (not, however, about Magic Realism, or modern fantasy, or surrealist fiction, or any other form of non-genre fantastic lit). Even when he

is not right he is provocative. But I found this out not through *CT*, but through a long and lively correspondence with Bruce Sterling, who in the course of our debate explained to me with reasoning and examples what Vince was up to.

CT's first mistake was the use of pseudonyms. I know the argument that SF writing and publishing is so small a field that unless protected by an alias, a critic cannot speak the truth without it affecting his career, his social life, or both. I think this argument is specious. I say this having fallen prey to the lure myself, publishing "Report on the Sophomore Class Dress Code" as Hunilla de Cholo in *CT*—an act that I almost immediately regretted. Anything worth saying is worth saying in the open. There is no SF thought police, and the writers in *CT* didn't spend any time attacking anyone in a position of authority anyway—they spent their time and energy attacking other writers. I fail to see how hiding behind a pseudonym while slandering Stan Robinson or Connie Willis contributes to the improvement of SF.

Bruce tells me at least one intent of *CT* was to shake up the assumptions of the "humanists," to get them to see the light. Maybe that was the conscious

motive, but CT used lousy tactics--when you attack a writer he is going to be too busy getting mad to listen to your argument--and in most cases CT didn't folow up the snidely worded attack with anything approaching a logical argument. Also, unconscious motives (such as a desire to justify his own practice) can too easily intrude to corrupt whatever good intent the critic may have had. If you have the courage of your convictions you admit to them openly.

If it is objected that a critic speaking in his own name must pull his punches too much, I reply that if that is the case, such punches ought to be pulled. As it stands, more than one humanist writer, subjected to what passed for criticism in CT, felt--justifiably, I think--that it was more a mugging than a critical debate.

FOUR

One of the phenomena that this entire hyperbolic debate has made me realize is that critical discourse in science fiction is too prone to superlatives. This has been true from the beginning. Maybe it's just that SF readers and writers like to think about cosmic events in cosmic terms, but whatever the reason, it seems to me that we are too ready in SF to praise or condemn too loudly, and without adequate perspective. Too often what passes for real criticism (not just what appeared in CT) reads not much different from the blurbs on the backs of paperbacks. The 1940s were a "golden age." John W. Campbell was an "editorial genius." So-and-so is a "revolutionary writer." His type of SF is "a breakthrough into new realms of experience." His book is "like nothing you have ever read before." The flip side of inflated praise is the killer put-down.

Anyone who has any familiarity with literary history knows that you can't tell what's going to impress future readers so easily. The battlefields are littered with the corpses of writers who were praised too highly; the pantheon is filled with others who were ignored despite the genius that seems self-
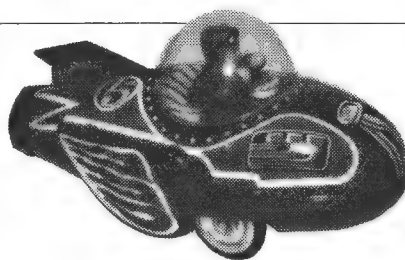
Many people have reacted to *Neuromancer* as if it were some sudden innovation in fiction writing.

evident to us today. Knowing this, we ought to go a little easier in our estimations. We ought to think twice, then think again before we start trumpeting someone else's failure or success.

Not only that, too much praise or blame is not good for the writer himself. See below.

FIVE

Some revisionist notes on *Neuromancer*:

One of the unfortunate results of the orgy of manifesto writing is that many people have reacted to William Gibson's novel not as an individual work, but as the representative of a movement, with Gibson as either savior or devil. The overwhelming praise that the book has garnered has made it almost impossible to talk about it objectively. I don't think I'm any final arbitor or objective judge--I am a humanist--but I also think I'm capable of seeing the virtues of the punk approach. I'd like to talk a little bit about what *Neuromancer* is not. If the prevailing tone of this is negative, realize that this is not out of any quarrel I have with Gibson's approach or achievement, seen for what it is. I think Gibson is a writer of talent and savvy, I have no problem with his book receiving praise,

a Nebula and a Hugo, and I look forward to reading his work for many years to come. My quarrel is with the reaction the book has aroused, and with what seems to me to be the distortion in perception this has caused. The unequivocal praise the book has gotten has done Gibson a disservice. I make no claim that what I'm saying here is original or earth shattering. I do claim that this perspective will help to illuminate what I mean by humanism and make some further points about SF criticism and career shaping.

Many people have reacted to *Neuromancer* as if it were some sudden innovation in fiction writing. I would like to point out areas where this book is not any fundamental advance.

PLOT: the plot of *Neuromancer* is not new in any way. This is not surprising and it is certainly not a condemnation. It is just a fact. How many new plotlines have been invented? The book is basically a "caper novel," exactly like an old *Mission: Impossible* script crossed with a hardboiled detective novel.

Listen to this plot outline: Case is a down-and-out young man living on the fringes of society in a large city. He dabbles in criminality but isn't very successful and is going nowhere. He meets a resourceful young woman, Molly, and the two of them fall in with an older, somewhat mysterious man, Armitage, who gets them involved in a projected crime. They must also enlist the help of an older "pro," the Dixie Flatline, who is no longer able to make it on his own, and who in fact must be "sprung" from captivity before they can proceed. In order to succeed in this task they must practice their skills, become a team instead of a group of isolated individuals, but the isolated nature of these people leads to some complex interrelationships. Eventually they enjoy a partial success, not unmixed with failure. The story ends on a note of wistful melancholy.

What I've described is not *Neuromancer*, but a 1973 movie called *Harry In Your Pocket*, with Michael Sarrazin as "Case," Trish Van Devere as "Molly,"

James Coburn as "Armitage," and Walter Pidgeon as the "Flatline." I had to twist this a little to make it fit, but not much, and those elements of *Neuromancer* that don't appear in this movie I could compile from a short list of Raymond Chandler novels, primarily *The Big Sleep*.

PROSE: Much has been written about the startling and vivid prose style of *Neuromancer*. "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." This is a sharp metaphor, entirely appropriate in that it foreshadows what is one of the prevailing themes of the book—how the natural world in the future is overwhelmed and subsumed by the technological one. Once again I point to Raymond Chandler as the origin of this prose, which depends on a large number of metaphors, the more startling and original the comparisons the better, and on an equal ellipsis of mundane description and "filler." It reminds me a little of metaphysical poetry of Donne and his followers, where the style draws attention to itself, where the object is to amuse and startle the reader with the extremity and novelty of the allusions.

But I would also point out that such a style balances on a knife edge of taste. To work the metaphor has to be accurate and apt as well as original. And even when it succeeds such a style is very vulnerable to mannerism, cuteness, overstatement, and melodrama, as it does even in some of Chandler's best work. When it slides over the line it can be painful:

"*Cold steel odor and ice caressed his spine.*

And faces peering in from a neon forest, sailors and hustlers and whores, under a poisoned silver sky. . .

'Look, Case, you tell me what the fuck is going on with you, you wig or something?'

A steady pulse of pain, midway down his spine—" (p. 116)

This may merely be a matter of taste, but this passage and others like it in *Neuromancer* seem to me a little

too breathless. Too many romantic images, too much straining for effect, too many ellipses and one-sentence paragraphs. It strikes me that *Neuromancer's* prose is so hot that it is not going to wear very well over the years.

CHARACTERS: The characers of *Neuromancer*, with the possible exception of Case, are no more than two-dimensional. They are types and nothing more. I trust I don't have to make an argument in the case of Linda, Armitage/Corso, Riviera or 3Jane, but let me deal with one on which I might get some protest: Molly.

Molly is a variation on a stock character, the hard-as-nails whore with the vulnerable heart. Gibson does some interesting things to enrich the cliche: for instance, Molly's surgically implanted mirrorshades are an effective metaphor for her personality: they reflect back the image of the viewer, they prevent you from seeing her eyes (traditionally the windows to the soul), and they make it necessary for her tear ducts to be rerouted to her mouth, so when she feels the need to cry, she instead spits. This is clever and appropriate. But aside from such flourishes as this there is nothing very interesting about Molly. She is a superwoman, capable of walking on a broken leg, totally cynical about people's motives, unable to stand emotional closeness, trained in the martial arts, and she has claws instead of fingernails. She's also incredible in bed. This is a character that offers no advance over pulp fiction. And this is one of the most fully realized figures in the book.

THE POINT: The point of this analysis is not to say that *Neuromancer* is a bad book, or that it is an unoriginal one, but that it is not so groundbreaking, seen along these lines, as has been suggested. The point is that we should judge the book according to some more realistic standards if we are going to judge it at all. We should not act as if William Gibson invented literature or science fiction all by himself, on the spot. I'm sure Gibson would not quarrel with this and is uncomfortable

about the vulnerable position all this praise has put him in. That is what I mean when I say that too much praise can hurt the writer.

SIX

I already suspect what a cyberpunk would say in response to this: "John, your critique may be true from a proper literary perspective, but it's all irrelevant. The fact that you would go to such pains to make traditional literature's case against *Neuromancer* just shows how much you are under the sway of your graduate school education. The whole point of the punk movement in rock and in SF is to go back to the roots—not to deny SF's pulp origins, but to use them. What makes *Neuromancer* startling and original is its vision of the future, a totally new vision, projecting from the 80s and not the 50s and 60s, the rut that so much SF pre-Gibson and the punks seemed to be stuck in. *Neuromancer* blasts away the detritus of thirty years of lazy SF writers unwilling to re-imagine the future based on what we really know today. Say goodbye to yesterday's tomorrow! Plot, character, and style are fundamentally irrelevant to SF. They are merely the icing on the cake, and if the cake is rotten it needs to be rebaked."

This is of course the chief argument for cyberpunk and it is a good one. I agree that people writing SF set in the future need to rethink their assumptions, and this is to the good. But that is not everything that gets published under the rubric "SF," and it is not the only value by which to judge SF.

Plot, character and style are not mere icing. This is the crucial difference between the critical perspectives of cyberpunk and humanism. Any fiction that conceives of itself as a vehicle for something called "ideas" that can be inserted into and taken out of the story like a passenger in a Toyota is doomed, in my perhaps staid and outmoded opinion, to a very low level of achievement. And what do you mean by an "idea," anyway? The notion that people will plug into computers is an idea,

but the notion that a man who forgets what he has done is still morally responsible for his actions isn't? These are both ideas, in my book. The second is a hopelessly humanist one, yet I don't think it would be out of place to base an SF story on that idea ("A Clean Escape," by John Kessel, *Asimov's*, May 1985). I'm not saying that an SF writer ought to be unconcerned with accurate speculation about the future. But to say that this is the only standard by which to judge SF, to forgive all other faults if only the work has a novel technological background, to call Connie Willis' or Kim Stanley Robinson's work sentimental while remaining totally blind to *Neuromancer's* sentimentality: that is critical blindness. I can recognize the virtues of cyberpunk; why can't *CT* recognize the virtues of humanism?

SEVEN

Let's cut this another way, just to make sure I'm getting my point across. Let's look at two sf classics, published about the same time, one of which resembles *Neuromancer* (I believe Gibson has even said that he was influenced by it) and the other what I would call a classic humanist SF novel: Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (1956) and Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1955–57; collected 1960). Both of these are excellent books, according to their own lights. *TSMD*, a revenge novel set a few hundred years in the future, shows the pyrotechnic style of *Neuromancer*, has a similarly melodramatic plot (borrowed from *The Count of Monte Cristo*), a fast pace, colorful but shallow characterizations, and fertile SF conceptions tossed off with little explanation. *ACFL* is much slower, has little SF invention (it's a classic after-the-bomb story), has a plot based on character and ethics/philosophy/theology, employs a more sober prose style, is more detached from its characters, and depends for its appeal on its cooly ironic humor, its complex symbology, the sincerity of its moral debate, and the depth and humanity of its characters.
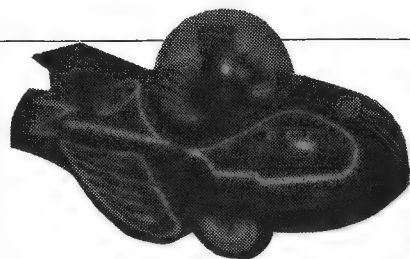
Anyone who has any familiarity with literary history knows you can't tell what's going to impress future readers so easily.

Which is the better book? Although it's easy to have an opinion, the question is fundamentally unanswerable. Which is a better science fiction book? It depends on your definition. The tropes of American pulp SF are much more evident in Bester than in Miller. One way to put the distinction is to say that *TSMD* is science fiction, while *ACFL* uses science fiction. *TSMD* is the kind of SF book that a traditional lit professor might be unable to appreciate, while *ACFL* has been praised by Walker Percy. In some circles this latter fact is grounds enough for tossing *ACFL* out of the science fiction clubhouse and ostracizing poor Walter M. Miller, who somehow managed to publish his book in *F&SF* just like a "real" SF writer. But who else would have published it? If you say humanist SF isn't real SF, where are all we humanists going to go? *The New Yorker* won't have us and in truth we don't belong there. We have the credentials of SF writers, and we can point to books like *A Canticle for Leibowitz* for our pedigree. Can't we play SF, too?

I would guess that Vincent Omniaveritas would prefer Bester over Miller but I think it is possible for a real person (me) to like both books without being a hypocrite.

EIGHT

Applying the punk esthetic to everything in the field without discretion would have us write off, for instance, almost all the work of Philip K. Dick. Show me somewhere in Dick where he presents even a halfway convincing extrapolation, where he shows any real knowledge of science or technology. Prove to me that the value of Dick's writing has anything to do with his technological vision of the future. I would gladly put up a list of SF works that succeed on humanist critical standards against a list that succeed on punk standards. And I don't think the lists would be mutually exclusive, either. Here are some humanist SF books, off the top of my head:

> *The Man in the High Castle*
> *More Than Human*
> *The Left Hand of Darkness*
> *The Man Who Fell to Earth*
> *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*
> *Camp Concentration*

I point out that these works are not devoid of "ideas," but that they depend as much on their attention to plot, character, style and the other values of traditional fiction for their success as they do on scientific, technological or social extrapolaton. Good SF should be good fiction. The radicalness in my position—which I believe is the humanist position—is that I think SF can't be good unless it is good fiction, no matter how good it is as extrapolation.

I expect much of the punk SF of 1985 to appear as hopelessly quaint as *Ralph 124C41+* in twenty years, while people will still be reading Wolfe's *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* and *The Book of the New Sun*. But that's just an opinion, subject to change.

I don't have a manifesto. I think there are many kinds of good writing. I think we ought to lower our voices. I think writers should speak very softly, write whatever moves them as well as they can, and let the works speak for themselves.●

THE TEMPLE OF CONFUSION

Science Fiction: 1, Harper's: 0
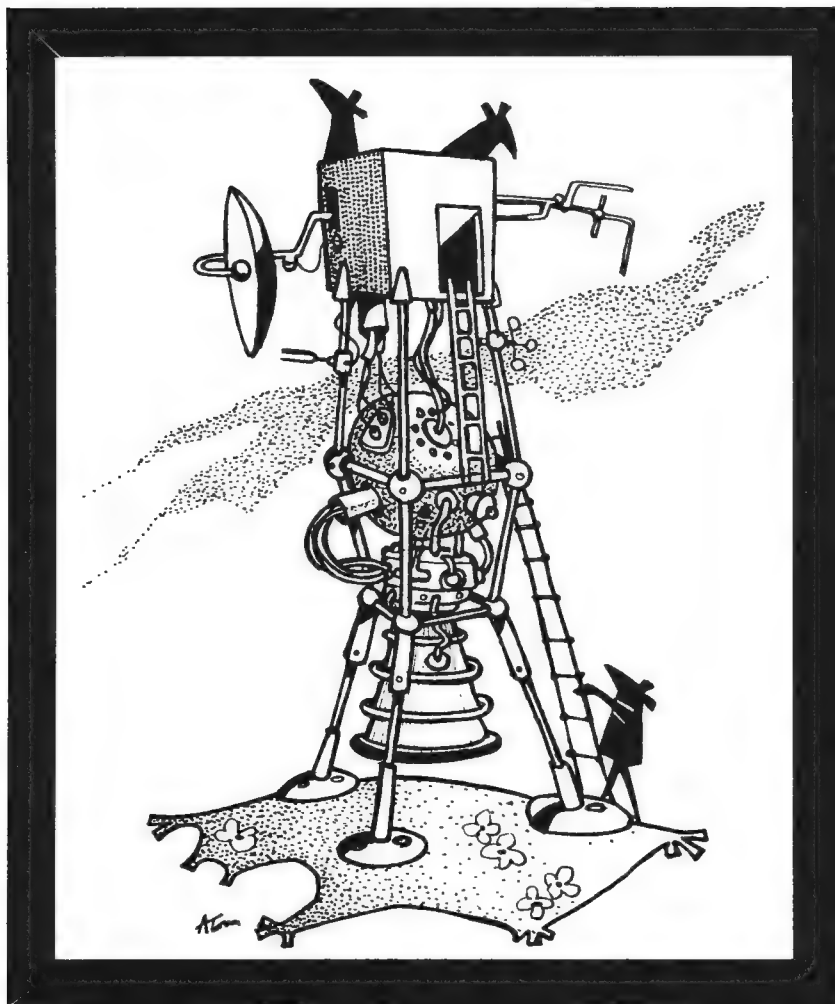
Arthur Thompson

By Ted White

What is it about science fiction that drives representatives of the lit-crit business up the wall? Is it the "immaturity" of a genre which traces its roots back only a bare century? (But then, few genres of fiction can claim to be much older—genre fiction is basically a Twentieth Century development—with mystery fiction claiming the same antecedents, like Poe, and western fiction an even more recent birthdate.) Or is it the contempt still expressed toward mundane, "mainstream" fiction by some SF writers and editors? (John W. Campbell, epochal editor of *Astounding/Analog*, is credited with "declaring (science fiction's) independence from literature, thereby changing its status from that of a poor relation to that of an indifferent neighbor." Does this rankle?)

Or is it more basic? Does science fiction contain within itself the seeds of a vision that offends the myopic?

Whatever the answer, the simple fact is that those who hold "literature" to be a vaunted tower from which they survey the masses below with disdain periodically indulge in potshots at science fiction. *Newsweek*'s Peter S. Prescott has held the title of Dean of the Potshooters for more than a decade, but if he's not careful—or mellows out—Luc Sante will grab that title.

Sante—rumored to be a pseudonym, and credited as a writer for *The New York Review of Books*, *Manhattan, Inc.*, and *Newsday*—is the author of "The Temple of Boredom," subtitled "Science fiction, no future," in the October 1985 issue of *Harper's*. *Harper's* is a magazine with almost no future of its own and a lot of recent problems, so the piece shares the issue with the obligatory piece on AIDS ("AIDS: What Is To Be Done?"), the usual soul=searching piece on Japan ("Lost Samurai: The Withered Soul of Postwar Japan"), and a typical look at the media ("TV Puritans: Who Killed J.R.'s Sex Life?"). The magazine is a veritable temple of high culture, as you can plainly see.

Sante is not ignorant of science fiction—he offers in fact an acceptable potted history of the field—but his biases shield him from any insight. And it is from his biases that he writes, as he makes clear in his opening paragraph:

"*Science fiction has been invading daily life for a number of years, but recently it has become pandemic. That is because it is increasingly hard to distinguish between real and imaginary technology. The 'Star Wars' defense system proposed by the Reagan Administration seems neither more nor less real than, say, Gobots, those toys that, folded, look like trains or cameras and, unfolded, like robots. Each new camera or television or radio appearing on the market with dazzlingly miniaturized componants becomes almost instantly devalued by the appearance of a newer model with even more features. As each innovation appears, it seems both more desirable and less significant than the last, so that innovation itself has become an aesthetic quality, existing for its own sake. Hardly anyone can remember what labor it was that most devices are made to save us from. Technology has long been science fiction's conceit; now it is a conceit in real life as well.*"

What did the man just say? Is he talking about science fiction or is he in fact bemoaning aspects of modern life which he neither likes nor understands? "As each innovation appears, it seems both more desirable and less significant than the last..." Really? What innovations are being referred to here? Sante mentions cameras, radios, televisions (television sets, that is; one aspect of the Modern Ignorance is that a television receiver is called "a television" and apparently even those who believe themselves to be Fighting The Good Fight for Literature no longer feel the need to be literate)—consumer goods, in a phrase. What kind of innovation occurs in this area? There is basic innovation—the introduction of the Polaroid camera, say, or the VCR—which introduces a brand-new product, the ramifications

of which are unpredictable. The automobile falls into this category, and the changes (both good and bad) it has made on our culture and our environment are profound. Then there is the "innovation" to which Sante refers: the introduction of new features to an existing product—like color, and, more recently, stereo to television. Again, the automobile makes the best example: while any 1986 car can be said to be superior in almost all aspects to any car of the Twenties or Thirties—better handling, more efficient, easier to drive, more comfortable—this "innovation" has come in small evolutionary increments and has been confused in most people's minds with superficial styling changes, the annual cosmetic rejuggling of bits of chrome.

But how can these "innovations" be "both more desirable and less significant than the last"? Is Sante saying that the buying public is seduced by insignificant changes in the products it buys? And if this is what he is complaining about, what in hell does it have to do with science fiction? Sante is—for better or worse—critiquing our culture and not a genre of fiction. (As a culture critic, Sante is no better than those who write for the Sunday supplements; his criticisms are obvious and banal and, worse, unperceptive.)

The key to Sante's biases come at the end of his paragraph: "Technology has long been science fiction's conceit; now it is a conceit in real life as well." Oh, a technophobe. Do you suppose he had a bad experience with an electric typewriter?

Later in his piece, Sante states that a recent science fiction novel "displays all the hallmarks of word-processor style: short paragraphs, a rambling breeziness, a tendency to repeat background information, a general confusion about what occurred in earlier chapters." Need it be pointed out that none of the "hallmarks" pointed out by Sante are actually byproducts of using a word-processor? (In fact, several of them are exactly the type of errors which word-processors are touted for correcting.) In context, it is clear

that Sante is using "word-processor style" as a perjorative; he equates it with "haste and a contempt for the audience." But the "hallmarks" of which Sante complains are much more likely to be the symptoms of writing by dictation. (This was popular with some prolific writers forty years ago, the most notable example being Erle Stanley Gardner, but few pursue it today.)

So what we have here is yet another fuzzy thinker giving momentary vent to his biases. He doesn't understand technology—doesn't even appear to understand the meaning of the word—but he doesn't like it. Possibly he went shopping recently for a VCR and was confused by the variety of formats and features available. He's irritated about it and looking for an outlet. Science fiction is his excuse.

Sante sets up a straw man and calls it science fiction:

"*Science fiction held out to imaginative writers the lure of complete license in the pursuit of subject matter. No longer would fiction be restricted to a set of variations upon existing themes; it would be released from drudgery and repetition, from the hearth and the battlefield, from the abject deeds of mere humans. Fiction henceforth would be allowed to fly unimpeded into infinite realms, far from the miseries of daily life.*

"*It is hard, a century or so later, to recall science fiction's original promise. Even today, when technological boosterism is at a pitch not seen in years, the mechanical utopias envisioned back then seem remote. Just as the creative leisure once anticipated as the legacy of the machine age materialized only as consumerism (!) and boredom, so science fiction's great horizons have shrunk. Rather than inspiring liberty, science fiction has merely generated a new set of conventions...*

"*Conventions, of course, are attributes of all literary genres, and it seems pointless to fault a genre merely for being a genre. What makes science fiction different from other genres is the hubris of its intention, which is*

nothing less than to depict the future, and the impossible. That it usually delivers pedestrian silliness is therefore thrown into much greater relief. Like modern technology, science fiction relies on mystification to disguise the fact that it is continually retailing the same product." (Emphasis is mine.)

Sante thinks "the idea of science fiction is most succintly represented by the coupling of terms in its very name," but he seems strangely unaware--in either his potted history or in the passage quoted above--that the "very name" is far less than "a century or so" old. Verne--whom he identifies as the founder of science fiction--referred to his work as "romances." By the early Twentieth Century Hugo Gernsback was referring to Verne's "scientific romances." By the time Gernsback launched *Amazing Stories* in 1926, he had coined the word "scientifiction," abbreviated "stf," and still to be found in occasional use. "Science fiction," a more "modern" version of that word, followed a few years later, and it was not until the mid-Fifties that Forry Ackerman cursed us with "sci-fi."

Thus, the name for the territory was refined even as the territory itself was refined (into a genre published almost exclusively in magazines from 1926 until the late Forties). I don't believe this was a coincidence. The "fall" of science fiction from the "literature" of Verne and (more so) Wells, into the "genre" it is today--as well as the drastic lowering of literary standards in its early days as a genre (the late Twenties and early Thirties)--can be seen as a function of the marketplace, and the demands placed on all genre fiction.

"Literature" is seen to be the product of novels and novelists; genre fiction, on the other hand, is a <u>product</u>, with which a stable of publications must be filled on a regular basis, for sale to regular purchasers, who want approximately the same thing (only better) in each issue.

The demand of readers for brand new material which is just like what they've already read is a publishing reality, and it can be found behind virtually every best-seller. (The same principle applies--even more strongly--to the less literate media: television, movies, popular music.) The purveyors of genre fiction--the editors and publishers in particular--are cynically aware of this. Most readers of Harlequin Romances consume those books like boxes of candy. Mystery fiction thrives on the series-character, a detective usually, who comes back in book after book. Sherlock Holmes was killed off by his creator, but revived by his audience.

But in science fiction this creates a paradox. Science fiction loves paradoxes, and this one sets up a tension which has fueled some of the field's best work, while allowing much that is mediocre to come along for the ride.

Thirty years ago the late Theodore Sturgeon remarked upon this by enumerating his Sturgeon's Law. "Sure," he said, "it's true that 90% of science fiction is crap. But that's true of everything: 90% is crap. We don't want to be judged by our worst--we want to be judged by our best: that other 10%."

Sturgeon himself did his best to live up to that rule by producing stories that fell into the 10%. This meant that he could not repeat himself, he could not fall comfortably into formula writing. And yet, in time, his audience believed they knew what characterized "a Sturgeon story," and they prized him for it. Their expectations, coupled with his own--his need to write without falling into a rut, and yet maintain his precarious financial success as a writer--resulted in a lot of unfulfilled publishing contracts and an erratic career. It also resulted in some brilliant stories.

Sante does not mention Sturgeon (or his Law); to have done so would have been to undermine his thesis.

He <u>does</u> mention James P. Hogan, however, off-handedly characterizing him "a lunatic." He says that Hogan "writes like a relic dredged up from a 1953 issue of *Amazing Stories*," thus betraying another area of ignorance (In 1953 *Amazing* enjoyed a brief period as a

It is precisely this "market economy" concept which underlies the contempt expressed by literati like Sante for science fiction and all other popular genre and non-genre fiction.

purveyor of high-quality SF before falling, a year or so later, into genre formula stories supplied by a stable of writers who were paid by the month; Sante should have said a <u>1933</u> issue).

When queried, Hogan responded that Sante "is expressing an opinion, which he has every right to hold. Arguing the right or wrong of someone else's value judgements would be pointless, and speculating about the predispositions of
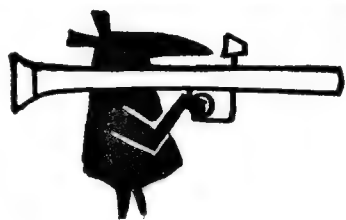
> **A publishing industry which not only supports, but makes stars out of mediocre writers like, for instance, Orson Scott Card or Nancy Springer, is not the place to look for higher standards.**

the person making them, futile. Mr. Sante openly declares his scorn for rationally derived conclusions. Presumably this implies a preference for the irrational, and this is clearly evident. However else they might be disguised, the roots of attitudes like the one expressed here tend to be ideological and emotional, hence unlikely to be influenced by debate."

Hogan adds, "In a market economy the customers decide; this particular customer doesn't like this product, and says so. What's wrong with that? What Mr. Sante seems to be saying is wrong is that less of the market agrees with him than he thinks ought to."

But it is precisely this "market economy" concept—and the treatment of individual works of fiction as "product" —which underlies the contempt expressed by literati like Sante for science fiction and all other popular genre and non-genre fiction.

Sante goes on to characterize Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury as science fiction's "Gog and Magog."

"The negative qualities represented by these two—prolix spew and poetical preciosity, respectively—have come to stand for the "scientific" and "literary" pillars of the house. Both Asimov and Bradbury come up with good ideas, both are extraordinarily dull writers, and both have publicity machines worthy of Hollywood. Thus two middling figures have come to epitomize the summit of the craft, thereby weakening the genre as a whole."

I doubt anyone would argue the point about both writers coming up with "good ideas," but would many readers conceed that they are "extraordinarily dull writers"? I doubt that. Taste can be argued forever, and it is likely Sante found them both "dull writers," but that word "extraordinaruily" implies malice on Sante's part. And "publicity machines worthy of Hollywood"? Surely at the least a gross exaggeration.

Both authors agree that there is no point in arguing with Sante: "I suggest we give Luc Sante's article the attention it deserves: Zero," Asimov states, while Bradbury adds, "the *Harper's* article is one that should be ignored. Why give attention to something like this that, if left to itself, would blow away in the wind? Neglect is often the best answer."

But then, the first lesson every professional writer learns is "Never argue with your critics."

Sante, in any case, seems immune to argument: his mind is made up. "The low pay meted out to science fiction writers in the past may heve been responsible for some of the genre's woolier examples of logorrhea and vacuity, but today, in a booming market, there is no such excuse," he states with dogmatic certitude. "The only explanations are haste and a contempt for the audience." He will allow no others.

But he is wrong. Once again he has ignored the market. The simple fact is that there is more science fiction being published now than ever before. Some paperback houses issue up to half a dozen SF novels every month. The demand for SF "product" is greater than ever before. Science fiction is, additionally, now in the hands of the "packagers," middlemen who come up with and sell "a concept" for a series of books—like, say, Nurses in Space—and then contract (at a low rate of payment) for anonymous writers to hack out the books. (One notorious packager had an extraordinary contract: it called for the delivery of "(blank) thousand words in the English language," with no other specification as to content or title.)

While most of the science fiction editors at the major publishing houses are dedicated to their jobs, they suffer enormous pressure to Meet The Deadlines each month, and some are only too willing to hand over some of that pressure and responsibility to a packager who can guarantee, say, a book every month, or to compromise with quality in the name of efficacy. And this creates situations in which writers can sell substandard work and see it published. But is the writer guilty of haste, or a contempt for the audience? (According to Sante, these are "the only explanations.") Some writers may indeed be guilty of one or both sins, but I suspect they are a small minority. A far greater number of writers are simply not very good—or, to be more charitable, are still learning their craft. Some overcome their limitations as prose stylists with the strength of their stories, or the ideas that propel their stories. (Science fiction has suffered from wooden characters for most of its history as a genre; in the best cases the result was a story that focussed

elsewhere—upon a new idea, or the unfolding of a future history—while the rest, victims of Sturgeon's Law, are simply forgotten.) And entirely too many SF writers jealously guard their Amateur Status ("I have a regular job, but I write these stories in my spare time") by refusing to take the craft of writing seriously. Perhaps if it was not so easy to sell shoddy goods, more writers would apply themselves to writing better. But a publishing industry which not only supports, but makes stars out of mediocre writers like, for instance, Orson Scott Card or Nancy Springer, is not the place to look for higher standards.

If there is pressure anywhere for higher standards in science fiction, it comes from the fans. Newcomers to science fiction always misunderstand SF fandom, and sometimes that misunderstanding is profound. The assumption that leads many people down the wrong path is that SF fans are parallel to, or analogous to, movie fans or soap opera fans. In this mistaken view, SF fans exist in order to pander to the egos of the "stars," the major-name writers, or indeed, any SF writer at all. Some writers expect to be received with fawning adulation by "the fans" at SF conventions. And most of these writers are subsequently disappointed when this fails to happen. Some of them have lashed out bitterly in response to the failure of their expectations, cursing SF fans as reactionaries who "hold back the development of the field."

Sante swallowed those sour grapes: "The cultlike ferocity of science fiction fandom serves only to cultivate what is most sickly and stunted about the genre." This is nonsense, and ignorant nonsense at that.

Science fiction fandom has never been a fandom of writers, but rather a fandom of science fiction. What unites the disparate members of the science fiction community is a shared vision: a science fiction vision. It comes from staring up at the stars at night, as a child, and wondering what really lies out there, and from that incredible *frisson* that occurs when one encounters

an aspect of that Mystery—like a first telescope view of Saturn's rings, or the experience of a Shuttle liftoff—and then finding a kind of fiction which deals with these ideas and feelings, however clumsily or imperfectly. It come from a childhood curiosity—how? and why?—piqued perhaps by watching tadpoles grow legs in a fishbowl, and directed towards science, which tries to ask the right questions to elicit answers about the Mystery. And it comes from the realization—easier to accept while still young—that the future will be different and not an endless repetition of today. Science fiction encompasses this and a great deal more: it exists as much as potential as it does in its existing achievements. And SF fans understand that potential and value it. Far from holding science fiction back (or cultivating only "what is most sickly and stunted about the genre"), SF fandom alone propels advancement and celebrates (via the Hugo Awards) noteworthy achievements. Grinding no axes, wedded to no single aspect of SF over its others (indeed, encompassing all the divergent points of view of every individual fan), fandom serves as the Keeper of the Flame, committed to the ideal.

Most of the best writers of science fiction were fans first. Most of the best editors of science fiction were fans first. That fact—their basic commitment to science fiction before it became a profession or a livelihood—explains their willingness to remain in a field which for most of its history was, as Sante noted, notoriously low-paying. In the Sixties, fandom—indeed, the entire SF community—was split by the apparent conflict between the New Wave and older and more traditional ways of writing SF (unkindly referred to as "Old Wave"). It was a passing conflict, now fifteen years behind us, and simply existed in order to accomodate new writers in the field. At the time there was a lot of loose talk from a few hotheads about how "reactionary" fandom supposedly was, and how fandom was trying to put SF in a straitjacket (from which the New Wave was supposed to be removing it). But who was making all

the noise—on both sides of the argument? Fans—and writers, like Harlan Ellison, who had been fans themselves. Who was promoting the New Wave? Fans like Michael Moorcock, Charles Platt, Ellison, et al. And who was attacking it? Other fans—like Lester Del Rey. Cynical publishers, agents, packagers and others whose interest in SF is purely professional, neither understood nor involved themselves in the controversy. It was a non-issue to them, since it had nothing to do with sales (except in a negative way: they didn't regard the New Wave as being very commercial).

So it comes down to this: science fiction is part of a Twentieth Century dichotomy. On the one hand, it is a literature of ideas and ideals, a literature for visionaries, mystics and scientists. On the other hand, it is a genre of the publishing industry, subject to all the market forces that come to bear upon any genre of the publishing industry.

Luc Sante's criticisms consistently confuse these two aspects of science fiction, and additionally throw in the red herring of aspects of consumer technology which have nothing whatsoever to do with science fiction. Sante seems to be somewhat aware of the history of the art of SF, but ignorant of the history of the commerce in SF—which means that he has, at best, only one half of the picture.

Sadly, in the end he has nothing left upon which to rely but a dead cliche, the final refuge for the myopic: that "the future" has caught up with science fiction:

"Perhaps it is not so much that science fiction has compromised itself as that time has caught up with it. Its once vast terrain has been thoroughly plundered; what is left is detritus, exploitable but degraded. Science and fiction can both be found elsewhere; the future, though, must still be invented."

Only someone sadly lacking in imagination could have written that; there is no other explanation. Let us pity Luc Sante, whomever he may be.●

CAT scan

a column by BRUCE STERLING

Midnight on the Rue Jules Verne

A kind of SF folk tradition surrounds the founding figure of Jules Verne. Everyone knows he was a big cheese back when the modern megalopolis of SFville was a 19th-century village. There's a bronze monument to him back in the old quarter of town, the Vieux Carre. You know, the part the French built, back before there were cars.

At midnight he stands there, somewhat the worse for the acid rain and the pigeons, his blind bronze eyes fixed on a future that has long since passed him by. SFville's citizenry pass him every day without a thought, their attention fixed on their daily grind in vast American high-rises; if they look up, they are intimidated by the beard, the grasped lapel, the flaking reek of Victorian obsolescence.

Everyone here knows a little about old Jules. The submarine, the moon cannon, the ridiculously sluggish eighty days. When they strip up the tarmac, you can still see the cobbles of the streets he laid. It's all still there, really, the village grid of SFville, where Verne lived and worked and argued scientific romance with the whippersnapper H.G. Wells. Those of us who walk these mean streets, and mutter of wrecking balls and the New Jerusalem, should take the time for a look back. Way back. Let's forget old Jules for the

moment. What about young Jules?

Young Jules Verne was trouble. His father, a prosperous lawyer in the provincial city of Nantes, was gifted with the sort of son that makes parents despair. The elder Verne was a reactionary Catholic, given to frequent solitary orgies with the penitential scourge. He expected the same firm moral values in his heir.

Young Jules wanted none of this. It's sometimes mentioned in the SF folktale that Jules tried to run away to sea as a lad. The story goes that he was recaptured, punished, and contritely promised to travel henceforth "only in his imagination." It sounds cute. It was nothing of the kind. The truth of the matter is that the eleven-year-old Jules resourcefully bribed a cabin-boy of his own age, and impersonated his way onto a French merchant cruiser bound for the Indies. In those days of child labor, the crew accepted Jules without hesitation. It was a mere fluke that a neighbor happened to spot Jules during his escape and informed against him. His father had to chase him down in a fast chartered steam-launch.

This evidence of mulishness seems to have thrown a scare into the Verne family, and in years to come they would treat Jules with caution. Young Jules never really broke with his parents, probably because they were an unfailing source of funds. Young Jules didn't much hold with wasting time on day-jobs.

He was convinced that he was possessed of genius, despite the near-total lack of hard evidence.

During his teens and twenties, Jules fell for unobtainable women with the regularity of clockwork. Again and again he was turned down by middle-class nymphs whose parents correctly assessed him as an art nut and spoiled ne'er-do-well.

Under the flimsy pretext of studying law, Jules managed to escape to Paris. He had seen the last of stuffy provincial France, or so he assumed: "Well," he wrote to a friend, "I'm leaving at last, as I wasn't wanted here, but one day they'll see what stuff he was made of, that poor young man they knew as Jules Verne."

The "poor young man" rented a Parisian garret with his unfailing parental stipend. He soon fell in with bad company—namely, the pop-thriller writer Alexandre Dumas pere (author of *Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Three Musketeers*, about a million others). Jules took readily to the role of declasse intellectual and professional student. During the Revolution of 1848 he passed out radical political pamphlets on Paris streetcorners. At night, embittered by female rejection, he wrote sarcastic sonnets on the perfidy of womankind. Until, that is, he had his first affair with an obliging housemaid, one of Dumas' legion of literary groupies. After this, young Jules loosened up to the point of moral collapse and was soon, by his own admission, a familiar figure in all the best whorehouses in Paris.

This went on for years. Young Jules busied himself writing poetry and plays. He became a kind of gofer for Dumas, devoting vast amounts of energy to a Dumas playhouse that went broke. (Dumas had no head for finance—he kept his money in a baptismal font in the entryway of his house and would stuff handfuls into his pockets whenever going out.)

A few of Jules' briefer pieces—a domestic farce, an operetta—were produced, to general critical and popular disinterest. During these misspent years Jules wrote dozens of full-length

plays, most of them never produced or even published, in much the vein of would-be Hollywood scriptwriters today. Eventually, having worked his way into the theatrical infrastructure through dint of prolonged and determined hanging-out, Jules got a production job in another playhouse, for no salary to speak of. He regarded this as his big break, and crowed vastly to his family in cheerful letters that made fun of the Pope.

Jules moved in a fast circle. He started a literary-artistic group of similar souls, a clique appropriately known as the Eleven Without Women. Eventually one of the Eleven succumbed, and invited Jules to the wedding. Jules fell immediately for the bride's sister, a widow with two small daughters. She accepted his proposal. (Given Jules' record, it is to be presumed that she took what she could get.)

Jules was now married, and his relentlessly unimaginative wife did what she could to break him to middle-class harness. Jules' new brother-in-law was doing okay in the stock market, so Jules figured he would give it a try. He extorted a big loan from his despairing father and bought a position on the Bourse. He soon earned a reputation among his fellow brokers as a cut-up and general weird duck. He didn't manage to go broke, but a daguerrotype of the period shows his mood. The extended Verne family sits stiffly before the camera. Jules is the one in the back, his face in a clown's grimace, his arm blurred as he waves wildly in a broker-age floor "buy" signal.

Denied his longed-for position in the theater, Jules groaningly decided that he might condescend to try prose. He wrote a couple of stories heavily influenced by Poe, a big period favorite of French intellectuals. There was a cheapo publisher in town who was star-ting a kid's pop-science magazine called "Family Museum." Jules wrote a couple of pieces for peanuts and got cover billing. The publisher decided to try him out on books. Jules was willing. He signed a contract to do two books a year, more or less forever, in exchange for a monthly sum.

Jules, who liked hobnobbing with explorers and scientists, happened to know a local deranged techie called Nadar. Nadar's real name was Felix Tournachon, but everybody called him Nadar, for he was one of those period Gallic swashbucklers who passed through life with great swirlings of scarlet and purple and the scent of attar of roses. Nadar was involved in two breaking high-tech developments of the period: photo-graphy and ballooning. (Nadar is per-haps best remembered today as the father of aerial photography.)

Nadar had Big Ideas. Jules' real forte was geography—a date-line or a geodesic sent him into raptures—but he liked Nadar's style and knew good copy when he saw it. Jules helped out behind the scenes when Nadar launched THE GIANT, the largest balloon ever seen at the time, with a gondola the size of a two-story house, lavishly supplied with champagne. Jules never rode the thing— he had a wife and kids now—but he re-tired into his study with the plot-line of his first book, and drove his wife to distraction. "There are manuscripts everywhere—nothing but manuscripts," she said in a fine burst of wifely con-fidence. "Let's hope they don't end up under the cooking pot."

Five Weeks In A Balloon was Jules' first hit. The thing was a smash for his publisher, who sold it all over the world in lavish foriegn editions for which Jules received pittances. But Jules wasn't complaining—probably be-cause he wasn't paying attention.

With a firm toehold in the public eye, Jules soon hit his stride as a popular author. He announced to the startled stockbrokers: "*Mes enfants*, I am leaving you. I have had an idea, the sort of idea that should make a man's fortune. I have just written a novel in a new form, one that's entirely my own. If it succeeds, I shall have stumbled upon a gold mine. In that case, I shall go on writing and writing without pause, while you others go on buying shares the day before they drop and selling them the day before they rise. I am leaving the Bourse. Good evening, *mes enfants*."

Jules Verne had invented hard science fiction. He originated the hard SF metier of off-the-rack plots and characters, combined with vast exposi-tory lumps of pop science. His innova-tion came from literary naivete; he never learned better or felt any reason to. (This despite Apollinaire's sniping remark: "What a style Jules Verne has, nothing but nouns.")

Verne's dialogue, considered quite snappy for the period, was derived from the stage. His characters constantly strike dramatic poses: Ned Land with harpoon upraised, Phileas Fogg reap-pearing stage-right in his London club at the last possible tick of the clock. The minor characters—comic Scots, Rus-sians, Jews—are all stage dialect and glued-on beards, instantly recognizeable to period readers, yet fresh because of cross-genre effects. They brought a proto-cinematic flash to readers used to the gluey, soulful character studies of, say, Stendhal.

The books we remember, the books determined people still occasionally read, are products of Verne in his thir-ties and forties. (His first novel was written at thirty-five.) In these early books, flashes of young Jules' student radicalism periodically surface for air, much like the Nautilus. The character of Captain Nemo, for instance, is often linked to novelistic conventions of the Byronic hero. Nemo is, in fact, a demo-cratic terrorist of the period of '48, the year when the working-class flung up Paris barricades, and, during a few weeks of brief civil war, managed to kill off more French army officers than were lost in the entire Napoleonic cam-paigns. The uprising was squelched, but Jules' generation of Paris '48, like that of May '68, never truly forgot.

Jules did okay by his "new form of the novel." He eventually became quite wealthy, though not through publishing, but the theater. (Nowadays it would be movie rights, but the principle still stands.) Jules, incidently, did not write the stage versions of his own books; they were done by professional theater hacks. Jules knew the plays stank, and that they travestied his

books, but they made him a fortune. The theatrical version of his mainstream smash, *Michael Strogoff*, included such lavish special effects as a live elephant on stage. It was so successful that the term "Strogoff" became contemporary Paris slang for anything wildly bravissimo.

Fortified with fame and money, Jules lunged against the traces. He travelled to America and Scandanavia, faithfully toting his notebooks. He bought three increasingly lavish yachts, and took to sea for days at a time, where he would lie on his stomach scribbling *Twenty Thousand Leagues* against the deck.

During the height of his popularity, he collected his family and sailed his yacht to North Africa, where he had a grand time and a thrilling brush with guntoting Libyans. On the way back, he toured Italy, where the populace turned out to greet him with fireworks and speeches. In Rome, the Pope received him and praised his books because they weren't smutty. His wife, who was terrified of drowning, refused to get on the boat again, and eventually Verne sold it.

At his wife's insistence, Jules moved to the provincial town of Amiens, where she had relatives. Downstairs, Mme. Verne courted local society in drawing rooms crammed with Second Empire bric-a-brac, while Jules isolated himself upstairs in a spartan study worthy of Nemo, its wall lined with wooden cubbyholes full of carefully labeled index-cards. They slept in separate bedrooms, and rumor says Jules had a mistress in Paris, where he often vanished for weeks.

Jules' son Michel grew up to be a holy terror, visiting upon Jules all the accumulated karma of his own lack of filial piety. The teenage Michel was in trouble with cops, was confined in an asylum, was even banished onto a naval voyage. Michel ended up producing silent films, not very successfully. Jules' stepdaughters made middle-class marriages and vanished into straitlaced Catholic domesticity, where they cooked up family feuds against their scapegrace half-brother.

Verne's work is marked by an obsession with desert islands. Mysterious isles, secret hollow volcanoes in the mid-Atlantic, vast ice-floes that crack off and head for the North Pole. Verne never really made it into the bosom of society. He did his best, and played the part whenever onstage, but one senses that he knew somehow that he was Not Like The Others and might be torn to pieces if his facade cracked. One notes his longing for the freedom of empty seas and skies, for a submarine full of books that can sink below storm level into eternal calm, for the hollow shell fired into the pristine unpeopled emptiness of circumlunar space.

From within his index-card lighthouse, the isolation began to tell on the aging Jules. He had now streamlined the production of novels to industrial assembly-work, so much so that lying gossip claimed he used a troop of ghostwriters. He could field-strip a Verne book blindfolded, with a greased slot for every part—the daffy scientist, the comic muscleman or acrobat, the ordinary joe who asks all the wide-eyed questions, the woman who scarcely exists and is rescued from suttee or sharks or red Indians. Sometimes the machine is the hero—the steam-driven elephant, the flying war-machine, the gigantic raft—sometimes the geography: caverns, coal-mines, ice-floes, darkest Africa.

Bored, Jules entered politics, and joined the Amiens City Council, where he was quickly shuffled onto the cultural committee. It was a natural sinecure and he did a fair job, getting electric lights installed, widening a few streets, building a municipal theater that everyone admired and no one attended. His book sales slumped steadily. The woods were full of guys writing scientific romances by now—people who actually knew how to write novels, like Herbert Wells. The folk-myth quotes Verne on Wells' *First Men In The Moon*: "Where is this gravity-repelling metal? Let him show it to me." If not the earliest, it is certainly the most famous exemplar of the hard-SF writer's eternal plaint against the fantasist.

The last years were painful. A deranged nephew shot Verne in the foot,

crippling him; it was at this time that he wrote one of his rare late poems, the "Sonnet to Morphine." He was to have a more than nodding acquaintance with this substance, though in those days of children's teething-laudanum no one thought much of it. He died at seventy-seven in the bosom of his vigorously quarrelling family, shriven by the Church. Everyone who had forgotten about him wrote obits saying what a fine fellow he was. This is the Verne everyone thinks that they remember: the greybearded paterfamilias, the conservative Catholic hardware-nut, the guy who made technical forecasts that Really Came True if you squint real hard and ignore most of his work.

Jules Verne never knew he was "inventing science fiction," in the felicitous phrase of Peter Costello's insightful 1978 biography. He knew he was on to something hot, but he stepped onto a commercial treadmill that he didn't understand, and the money and the fame got to him. The early artistic failures, the romantic rejections, had softened him up, and when the public finally Recognized His Genius he was grateful, and fell into line with their wishes.

Jules had rejected repectability early on, when it was offered to him on a plate. But when he had earned it on his own, everyone around him swore that respectability was dandy, and he didn't dare face them down. Wanting the moon, he ended up with a hatch-battened one-man submarine in an upstairs room. Somewhere along the line his goals were lost, and he fell into a role his father might almost have picked for him: a well-to-do provincial city councilman. The garlands disguised the reins, and the streetcorner radical with a headful of visions became a dusty pillar of society.

This is not what the world calls a tragedy; nor is it any small thing to have books in print after 125 years. But the path Young Jules blazed, and the path Old Jules was gently led down, are still well-trampled streets here in SFville. If you stand by his statue at midnight, you can still see Old Jules limping home, over the cobblestones. Or so they say. ●
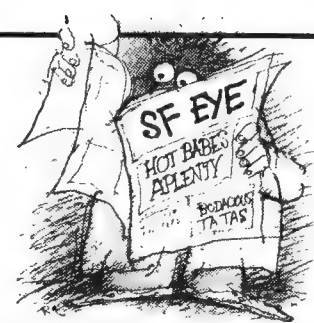
Richard Thompson

GALAXY 666 by "Pel Torro"
Arcadia House, 1968 $3.50 HC
Tower Books, $.50 PB

Reviewed by P. King

"In a universe containing countless millions of habitable worlds, life takes on an incredible diversity of forms. Intelligence is difficult to define but by and large it consists of the ability to solve problems.

"The old men had plenty of experience—one of them had even been to Galaxy 666 once and had the records of his journey stored in his memory bank—but their strength was diminished and their science obsolete. So it was left to two of their grandson's generation to cope with the apparently insoluble; to spend every last ounce of their ability grappling with the enigma of an apocryphal planet.

"Reliable data sources contradicted one another. Ships vanished mysteriously. Men vanished with them. But the strangest secret of all was the riddle of the enigmatical nexus between the two men themselves."

Thus the dust jacket introduces the reader to one of the all-time classics of bad writing. The science fiction genre has always been a ready market for second-rate fiction. For roughly ten years, Robert Lionel Fanthorpe was an enthusiastic supplier. Writing under a variety of pseudonyms, including the bizarre moniker above, Fanthorpe churned out a vast collection of almost unbelievably bad books. Galaxy 666 is one of these. With the exception of occasional italicized comments, I'll allow the book to speak for itself.

Retirement benefits:

Milka began tucking into magellanic pseudopods with scurgle grass and chipped funkleweed. Bion began carving a deliciously cooked leg of hurklebeast with oogonga sauce. It was a meal that would have cost anyone else fifteen credits. The two space veterans got it for one tenth of that price. With the kind of concessions they got and the kind of pensions they got, they could live like kings for the few years that were left before the rapidly overtaking feet of the monster called senility trod them back into the soil from which they had sprung.

Thus we have been introduced to the story's setting, via characters who are completely extraneous to the "plot" of the book. From here we will proceed to the planet in Galaxy 666.

Describing the landscape, the Pink and Grey section:

Having become acclimatized to the pink-tinged light, which gave everything a strangely roseate appearance, and which had the effect of lulling their senses into a rather dreamy false security, the four explorers looked at the ground between their feet. The ground beneath their feet was a very odd sort of terrain—though "terrain" is not, strictly speaking, the kind of word that ought to be used to describe the ground of a planet which is not the earth. Like so many of the old earth words, it has crept into the vocabulary of the empire. So they examined the terrain.

It was patchy, and there was no kind of order in the patches. Here and there were more drastic changes. In other places changes were slow and gradual.

Across to their right they could see two round hillocks coming out of the ground itself. Between their own position and those two hillocks, there was an expanse of flat smooth rock, so flat and smooth that it was slippery and difficult to walk on. There were pinkish streaks among the rock, and it seemed that some of the chromatic tint from the atmosphere owed its origin to these. There were a number of white veins in the rock, which bore some kind of resemblence to marble, but the majority of it was grey. It gave an over-all impression of greyness streaked with pink and white, rather than an over-all impression of whiteness tinged with grey and pink, or an over-all impression of pink streaked with grey and white.

Greyness was the dominant background shade; neither black nor white, but something midway between the two. It was a light rather than a dark grey, yet it could never have been so light that it might be mistaken for an off white.

The four explorers carried on across this flat terrain, Ischklah suddenly tripped and sprawled full length. The substance on which they walked was hard, and yet did not have the same unyielding hardness as granite or flint. It was more like the hardness of tough and highly polished wood. Ischklah picked himself up and rubbed ruefully at a bruise on his shin.

"Darn stuff is hard," he said.

No doubt.
The world our bold explorers were investigating contained some inexplicable life forms.

On meeting the aliens:

Through the pinky white light something that was obviously a living creature was coming toward them. In fact, several some-

things were coming toward them. They were not the kind of somethings that commend themselves by virtue of the charm of their physical appearance. Some people would say that there is much to be said for first impressions; others try to disregard first impressions on principle. Bronet was of the latter school of thought; otherwise he, being the nearest of the four explorers to the things, would have taken to his heels with a scream of fear.

There are some strange life forms in the universe. Judged by humanoid standards, these things were not only strange, they were revoltingly strange. They had pseudopods instead of limbs; they advanced by means of these pseudopods. They appeared to be as devoid of skeletal support as the wheel beast which had just zoomed across the planet as though it were a harbinger of their coming.

There was something revoltingly gelatinous about their general appearance. They slithered and slid; they came forward in a kind of crawling slide; in size they were bigger than the humanoids, and their upper extremities, which could only have been called heads by the most generous of descriptive writers, were covered with odd little sensory organs that might possibly have served some function similar to that which is carried out by the eyes and ears of a man. But this, as far as the four explorers were concerned, was still in the realm of speculation.

The things were odd, weird, grotesque. There was something horribly uncustomary and unwonted about them. They were completely unfamiliar, Their appearance was outlandish and extraordinary. There was something quite phenomenal about them. They were supernormal; they were unparalleled; they were unexampled. The shape of the aliens was singular in every sense. They were curious, odd, queer, peculiar and fantastic, and yet when every adjective had been used on them, when every preternatural epithet had been applied to their aberrant and freakish appearance, when everything that could be said about such eccentric, anomalous creatures had been

said, they still remained indescribable in any concrete terms.

On the off chance any readers have made it this far into the book without grasping the novel's essence, we reach the philosophical summation...

The Galaxy 666 Soliloquy: "We are living in a corner of the universe that can only be described as insane. This is the negative to the positive universe in which we live. This is the confusion which makes our order possible. This is the chaos which makes it feasable for us to live in a universe which is governed by scientific principles.

"This crazy galaxy is the price that the universe pays for order. 666, eh? By the seven green moons, it was well numbered! There's something strangely capricious about this place. Just as our universe is a motivated universe, this one is motiveless. The real universe, the universe to which we belong, has a purpose; this is purposeless. Our universe is straight forward; this one is whimsical, fanciful and fantastic. This is a temperamental galaxy, an hysterical galaxy, a mad galaxy. This is an insane, freakish, wanton, erratic, inconsistent galaxy; it's a completely unreasonable galaxy. It's undisciplined, refractory, uncertain and unpredictable. It's a volatile galaxy, a mercurial galaxy."

He suddenly collapsed on the floor of the alien ship, his arm across his face..

"This is a playful galaxy," he sobbed, "and we are the toys with which it plays."

So here we have a galaxy, and an apocryphal one at that, which possesses strange demonic characteristics that are the result of an arbitrary numbering scheme. That there is only one planet in this galaxy (which is occasionally referred to as a universe) and only passing mention of a star is a clear indication of its truly perverse character. The author's unique "style" pro-

vides reinforcement to the overt dread presented in the plot. That he cannot say something once is a hallmark of "Torro's" writing; this transforms the menace of the illogical planet--caught in a web of illogical plot devices--into an enigmatic universe of terror (well...unease).

Economic realities of the Seventies and Eighties preclude the continued publication of vast numbers of books that are as lacking in professionalism as Galaxy 666. "Torro"--Fanthorpe--has created in his multitude of novels, and especially in Galaxy 666, a standard that, in all likelihood, will never again be reached.

There are readers of science fiction who cannot abide the stale plots and moronic themes of mainstream science fiction, "science fantasy," and fantasy. They find these books, all too many of which have been highly successful, to be irritating reiterations of ideas that were idiotic cliches thirty years ago. They want something really bad. These readers are forced to rely on the pickings at the local used book emporia, thrift stores and bus depots. For these people, this book is highly recommended.

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WHEN GRAVITY FAILS
by George Alec Effinger, Arbor House, Jan. 1987, $16.95

Most artistic movements pass through four stages: creation, imitation, assimilation and stagnation. The Mirrorshades movement is no exception. Shortly after the creation phase (*Neuromancer*, Sterling's re-entry into SF with his Mechanist/Shaper universe, Shirley's embarking on his political *Eclipse* trilogy, the brief spate of collaborative stories) the imitative phase hit hard. Books like *Hardwired* and *Vacuum Flowers* appeared, and the mailboxes of *Asimov's* and *Omni* filled with cybersludge.

Now we have the first assimilative novel by old pro Effinger.

When Gravity Fails is a refreshing low-keyed romp, with none of the humorless earnestness of the imitators (or even some of the creators). It is set a

hundred years or so from now in a Balkanized world where most of the big countries have splintered into statelets under the weight of their decaying economies. The scene is "the street" in a ghetto filled with pimps, hookers and hustlers of all varieties. Almost everyone has had their gender changed a few times. Almost everyone has sockets implanted in their skulls into which can be inserted personality modules (wanna be Spiro Agnew for a day?) and/or data add-ons (need to be able to speak fluent Mandarin for a business meeting? or to have at your temporary mental grasp a thorough grounding in hydrodynamics?) Yeah, it does sound like a classic setting for a Mirrorshades imitator.

But Effinger is more canny than that. What lifts him into the category of assimilator (besides his impressive story-telling skills) is his refusal to fall into the grooves worn by Gibson, Sterling, et al. *When Gravity Fails* is happily free of Movement cant; from the macrolevel (the world at large, and the Fate of Humanity, are vague presences that rarely impinge on the characters' more pressing, if mundane, daily activities) to the micro (Effinger creates his own language, formal and slang, and not a single word or phrase uttered is borrowed from Gibson).

The novel is set entirely in and among the bars and the low-lifes of an Islamic red-light district—the Budayeen. Its first-person protagonist is a drug-besotted barfly named Marid Audran, a very reluctant hero. The book's scale has been reduced from the sweating and straining for a global perspective of the 'shades creators and imitators to a local murder mystery.

I cannot, in good conscious, comment on the plot. Murder mysteries need to have their twists and folds revealed at the author's intended pace. Suffice to say that it is a classic scenario that plays fair with the reader, illuminates some psychological dark corners, is filled with well-realized and engaging characters, and ends on a satisfying note of pathos. It is breezy, witty, engrossing in a manner that artfully conceals some pretty grim subsur-

face mental demons.

Effinger's detail work is thorough and engaging. He makes us believe without question that we are in what is a fairly alien culture for Americans. Instead of social revolutions, he gives us new-model can-openers or desklamps on virtually every page, handily achieving a primary Mirrorshades goal (and a goal of any practitioner of quality SF): "extrapolation down into the fabric of society" (to paraphrase Bruce Sterling). Brimful of extrapolation, the book never falters in its Arabic milieu. All of the speculations are where they ought to be, in the background of a good story, and each exists for a reason.

Enjoy this first fruit of Third Wave 'shades. It is a wonderfully entertaining novel. I hope there will be a dozen more like it. But beware. The social progression of the Mirrorshades movement is rapid. Very soon the stagnation phase will be upon us, and we will have to endure the SF equivalent of the Disco Seventies, while the jaded audience searches the horizon in vain for the Next Big Thing.

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LET'S ALL BE THERE

Sue Denim

In the interests of truth, cheap though it may be, here's a xerox of a memo I managed to smuggle back with me from my recent days in Hollywood:

<u>MEMO</u>

As you know, chief, we here at the network are dedicated to originality, pioneering new programming, taking the big risk. When we asked ourselves what we could do this season that would be really different, really daring, we of course looked to see what was hot last year.

Last year something called *Neuromancer* was hot. Our sources tell us this is a "cyberpunk" novel. So we ran a few ideas up the old flagpole and came up with a slogan for next season.

"Let's all be cyberpunk." Like it?

Of course an idea like this is no good unless you can reduce it to a formula, and by golly, we've done it. First you've got to have a corporate future, and computers running everything. Then you have wetware implants so the computers can screw around with the people on a direct level. Then you get some sleazoid protag from the streets, have them take on the corporations, and though they don't topple the government or anything (hey, this is the Eighties, man) they win by cutting themselves out of the system.

You ask, where we going to find stuff to fit the formula? No problem. First up is *Vacuum Flowers* by this kid Michael Swanwick. Swanwick obviously knows about cyberpunk because he wrote an article about it for *Asimov's* magazine. Well, hell, you can see it just by looking at the book.

Now, we figure cyberpunk has to have wetware implants, right? This book has got wetware out the old wazoo. Everybody's reprogramming everybody. It's amazing. In fact, you start to wonder why somebody hasn't just come along and enslaved everybody in the entire solar system since it's so easy to do. Boy, if we could just get a few of those gadgets, we wouldn't need TV anymore.

But I digress. You've got to have corporate mercenaries, and this book has them. At least in the first half, until Swanwick kind of loses interest in them, but they're *there* and that's what's important.

Your protag is a "persona bum" named—get this—Rebel. Couldn't you just die? Shades of Johnny Yuma. She's a wetware construct, see, and she was dumped over a real girl's brain. The book is about her just kind of wandering around the solar system for a few months with people kind of chasing her sometimes until she ends up going on a star cruise.

It's got everything, right?

Next there's *Hardwired* by Walter Jon Williams. You remember *Damnation Alley* with Jan-Michael "Airwolf" Vincent? That's what it is, with this guy

"Cowboy" with wetware implants who smuggles stuff in a tank. The corporations are called "Orbitals" (cause they're in orbit) and they've got mercenaries that are screwing everybody around. Then you've got this bimbo Sarah, your street-scum protag, but wait! She's really got a heart under all that leather—she's got a worthless, detestable parasite of a brother that she loves for no apparent reason at all.

Cowboy and Sarah fall in love, and maybe they don't bring down the Orbitals (I told you this was the Eighties), but they knock off a couple of baddies and cut themselves out of the system.

Finally we've got this cute kind of punk-rock novel. It's called *Wrack and Roll*, and it's by this even younger kid named Bradley Denton. It's so harmless it could go on in prime time—the people in it just say silly words like "sputz" and "scrod" and "dink" and "scag" and "frick" and "jag" instead of real words like "fuck" or "shit". I mean, the boy and the girl in this book are supposed to be doing it all the time, but Denton says she never, ever, takes off her skintight leather jeans. Not even in bed. (In fact, he makes a mystery out of it and then forgets to tell us the reason.) Like I said, this kid is naive to die for.

Okay, so there's no corporations, but there is a balkanized government, and it's virtually impossible to tell which side any of the government mercenaries (that are screwing everybody around) are on. And since they're shooting at each other as much as at the protags it doesn't really matter.

Besides, it's got mirrorshades, leather, and rock'n'roll. What more do you want?

So we decided we'd get us a technical advisor, now that we'd already made up our minds. We'd read about this *Cheap Truth* magazine in the Swanwick article, so naturally we thought Vincent Omniaveritas (aside from the silly name) would be perfect. I mean, the guy has a lot of style and great oratory and stuff. Well, we couldn't get him. They told me he had died in a shoot-out, but I'll believe it when I see Dan Rather

tell me. It's too bad, too, because we ended up with this bitch named Sue Denim, who has got to be perpetually on the rag or something.

She didn't even like the Swanwick novel. "He wants to write a romantic fantasy, for Christ's sake," she said. "Look what happens. Love conquers all. There's no plot, just a lot of aimless wandering through poorly thought-out sets.

"I mean, take the wetware business. He calls it wetware, but it's not actually biochips or anything, it's just plain old software, sort of like those Atari cartridges they used to have, only they can program your head with them. Swanwick has all kinds of hip, hot words in here, like 'paradigms' and 'retrofitting,' even though he seems to have no idea of how they should be used.

"He doesn't seem to have thought *anything* through. Just for one example, he has the first green belt on Mars *inside* the crater of Olympus Mons. That's the *last* place you could have one. The problem with growing stuff on Mars is atmospheric pressure. You need to get *lower*, not sixteen *miles* up into the atmosphere, for God's sake. One of his societies has an inflation rate of 'ten thousand percent daily.' This society has been around at *least* twenty years. What are they using for numbers on their currency? Now even scientific notation could handle those kinds of numbers.

"Look at the descriptions. Things 'stink' but the type of smell is never specified. Things are covered with 'urban grime.' How generic can you get? Earth from space is 'bright and glorious' and 'startlingly beautiful.' Does this make pictures in your head? If you're lucky it maybe reminds you of pictures you've seen somewhere else.

"The style is even worn out and clunky. People 'peer owlishly' into the 'Stygian gloom.' Eyes are 'two hot coals' or 'big as saucers.' Skin that's 'white as porcelain' and faces that go 'fishbelly white.' How about 'bright perky nipples, pink as rosebuds?'

"You have to ask yourself what's really going on here. Is Swanwick real-

ly trying to write a hard-edged, rigorously extrapolated novel of the future, or is he just trying to put a slick, contemporary look on an old-fashioned plasma-boiler? Sort of like Johnny Mathis with synths and drum machines?

"You can see his attitude in the little things. Like the character that thinks Anthony Trollope is the perfect author to read on a long spaceflight. The repeated reference to vaginas as 'figs.' The interjection, for little or no apparent reason, of the words 'unicorn,' 'ogre,' 'wizard,' 'parchment.' The fact that people wear 'cloaks' which they are wont to 'wrap...in storytelling folds.'

"He even delivers his own epitaph at the end. He's describing one of the orbitals, but he could be talking about the novel: 'brightly detailed yet somehow vague, not quite convincing, and ultimately banal.' Swanwick knows how to write—look at 'Trojan Horse' or 'Marrow Death.' He's got taste—look at his 'Postmoderns' article. He should know better than to have written this book.

"As for *Hardwired*, well, at least it's stylish. Right down to the annoying present-tense exposition. (Sure it gets your attention, but so does ending every sentence with an exclamation point! And they both get really tiresome after a while! Besides which, he can't keep his past tenses straight!) It's nice to see that Williams can swipe moves off people like McGuane and Crumley as well as Gibson and Zelazny.

"But boy does he steal. The 'interface' is obviously Gibson's matrix, the 'Orbitals' are Gibson's zaibatsus, and 'Damnation Alley' is...well...*Damnation Alley*.

"Slick as the style might be, the book is cold to the touch. You feel it's very much by the numbers. He cranks out formula slang by omitting the spaces between adjective and noun: 'panzerboy,' 'screamsheet,' 'zonedance,' 'hardfire,' 'dirtgirl,' 'nervewash,' and on and on. Note how every one of those words scans the same.

"When he's gone on this way too long he tries to fake emotion with pur-

ple prose like 'the freedom of the white crane to climb into the sky amid the silver glitter of stars.' Or 'Sarah wishes she could cry, for the dead hope framed in black on walls...for the broken thing that is all earthly aspiration.' The book is full of fake poetry. Williams is the kind of writer who has to say 'rimmed with kohl' instead of 'eyeliner.' We get lines like "Pain choses this moment to crawl over her ribs.' 'Fear overtones quaver at the hard edges of her consonants.'

"Is there anything of Williams himself in here? Or is it like Williams' description of that movement symbol, mirrorshades: 'Armor, he thinks, for the emotions, like the jacket, the strut, the attitude'? Reading this novel is like watching a fashion show. The characters strike exaggerated poses, and their conversations—convincing on a word-by-word level—are full of dramatic pauses and always seem to build to punchlines.

"And what's going on here but another romance? You can tell Cowboy is in love because he starts doing stupid things. The same sort of stupid mistakes that Sarah makes over and over for her worthless caricature of a brother. 'Don't get sentimental,' Sarah urges at one point, but in fact sentiment is what they are all yearning for but never manage to attain. There is a wonderful symbolic moment when Cowboy, strapped for money, is forced to sell part of his stash of artificial hearts.

"As for *Wrack and Roll*, it's hard to take it seriously enough to get angry at it. Despite the hideous slang, the 'mirrored eyeglasses,' the leather and guitars, this is self-indulgent, cutesy romantic tripe from the get-go.

"The characters are cartoons—an axe-wielding drummer, a yuppie dork who is supposed to be along for viewer indentification, but is about as sympathetic as a drunken frat-boy, and the pivotal figure, Lieza Galilei, the 'Bastard Child,' lead singer of the 'Blunt Instrument,' about whom it is said: 'Under that layer of leather she's a victim of self-hate.' The music the band plays is pretentiously called 'The Music' as

in: 'Didn't she realize that The Music was beyond the grasp of people like her?'

"In fact when the book isn't being nauseatingly cute (as when nuclear war is described as 'the likelihood that the planet would faw down and go boom'), or stupid (when they need to find a kidnaped scientist they literally ask the first person they meet in the street—who tells them how to do it, of course), it's being pretentious—check out the awful song lyrics at the beginning of each chapter.

"The hell of it is that all three of these books have an admirable theme—the triumph of the individual over a repressive system. (*Wrack and Roll* makes the biggest cop-out—the system fails through sheer luck, without bloodshed or raising serious issues.) But all three writers are tied to conventional romantic bullshit, and try to cover it up by encasing the work in a patina of 'cyberpunk.'

"The very idea of 'cyberpunk' is clearly out of hand. Yes, there *is* a new movement in SF, represented by John Shirley and Bill Gibson and Bruce Sterling and Rudy Rucker. And it doesn't have anything to do with 'cybers' or 'punks.' If you keep to your stupid definitions you're just going to be left behind. How does your formula account for Sterling's 'Green Days in Brunei,' or Rucker's *The Secret of Life*? These are both major works, breaking new ground and taking SF into the Nineties—and both still clearly part of the 'movement.' Whatever that movement is. Then there's Shirley's *Brigade*, arguably his best book, which transforms the mainstream novel using SF—and movement—techniques.

"Look, here's the bottom line. What you have to ask yourself when you read science fiction—*any* kind of fiction—is: given the author's assumptions, is this what the world would really *be* like? You know the author is lying to you, but are the lies so convincing you believe them anyway?

"For *Hardwired* I might go as far as maybe, but for *Vacuum Flowers* and *Wrack and Roll* the answer isn't just no, it's

hell no."

Denim went on at some length, but I'll spare you the rest. I mean, what she thinks has nothing to do with the real world. You and I, chief, know it doesn't matter what something *is*, it only matters what it *looks* like.

Some people just don't understand TV.

(SUE DENIM clawed her way to notoriety as a crime reporter for *Cheap Truth*, the politically correct house organ of 'cyberpunk.')

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